Summary

Aliens have invaded planet Earth. New York has been nuked. And Tony Stark... Well, he's not in Kansas anymore.

Please note that the title has been changed from A Whole New World to Golden Age.

I've started the editing process, so that'll be ongoing. Edited up through: Chapter 1
Chapter Notes

Many thanks to 55555 and ALittleBit for their encouraging responses.

This has no Beta, so there are bound to be mistakes I don't catch.

Also, my username has been changed from Joker_Alice to JasperMoore. I am still the same person.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There is nothing, and then there is pressure. He feels like he imagines he would if he were to cross the event horizon of a black hole- that stretching, crushing force of inescapable gravity- and there is cold and light and then-

Warmth. Sound. His mouth is dry and he feels like vomiting and there’s gold everywhere and shouts of alarm, and none of this makes sense because he should be dead. Death via nuke. Not hovering above what looks like some medieval market reenactment. He whips his head around (which, bad idea. Everything seems to be spinning now), trying to make sense of what he’s seeing, and among the sea of round, shocked faces, a head of dark hair, alabaster skin, and bright green eyes stands out with an expression of fascination. That guy is standing right next to some buff ginger with a big fucking hammer. And hey, that guy is- shit, he throws the hammer.

Tony throws up his arms, hands out to block, and as the hammer reaches him…

He finds himself somewhere else altogether.

Tony barely manages to lift the faceplate before he retches bile onto the smooth stone floor now beneath him. He falls to his knees, coughing and groaning as his fingers scrabble at the helmet release. The parted helmet strikes the floor with a dull clang and skitters away to rest out of reach, and Tony blinks sweat and blood from his eyes. Sweat plasters his damp hair to his scalp. Removing one glove to gingerly touch a throbbing tender spot on the back of his head, his fingers come back wet and red. Note to self. Suit needs more impact padding.

Someone speaks, but Tony needs a moment to realize that someone is JARVIS. He sounds like he’s speaking underwater, and he sounds concerned, but Tony can’t figure out why, and-

He wakes to the smell of blood and the sound of raw-throated screaming. Someone speaks but he can’t understand and there’s water on his face and now hands touch him and his eyes are open but he can’t see because the cave is too dark and Tony thrashes, trying to shove the hands away and the water along with it and his throat is raw and he can’t breathe and-

The next time Tony wakes up, no one touches him. He looks up at the ceiling, frozen in some bizarre survival instinct. It’s white. Kind of smoothish looking. Not at all cavey, which is unexpected. A page turns somewhere off to the right, and he stiffly follows the sound, glancing over. Green eyes peer curiously back at him, having looked up from a fat book. The guy sits- no wait. Perches. Perches is better- on a high-backed armchair, the book on his knees. On the table to the man’s left is Tony’s helmet. Oh, yeah. He flexes his fingers gingerly. The suit is gone.
That’s… probably not good.

Tony’s throat clicks when he swallows, and the man regards him cautiously, like Tony is some sort of spooked animal.

Silence stretches between them for several long, long seconds before the book thumps shut, and the stranger rises.

“Would you like a drink of water?” tall dark and creepy asks, as if he hadn’t just been watching Tony sleep. Tony gingerly sits up and rests his back against the fabric-draped headboard. He says nothing yet, instead flicking his eyes around to take in the scene. It’s… opulent. Golden walls, golden door, golden floor. Dark wood makes up the majority of the furniture, from the massive bookcases to the bed Tony rests in.

Why is he in a bed, again? He doesn’t remember getting in a bed. All he remembers is-

Tony flinches away as the stranger makes to hand him an honest-to-god goblet. The guy has the gall to look amused. Tony points to the bedside table and makes an attempt at speech. He somewhat succeeds.

“I don’t like being handed things,” he croaks, and god damn, he sounds like shit. As bad as his voice sounds, though… His body feels fine. He doesn’t hurt. He can breathe without feeling a knife-like pain in his lungs. Almost like he hadn’t been tossed around like a ragdoll in a dented can for seventeen hours. In fact, he’s pretty sure there were broken bones. Ribs at the very least, but- he breathes deeply- there’s no pain. He feels… fine. It doesn’t make any sense.

The goblet settles on the indicated table, and Tony hesitates only a heartbeat before snatching it up. He takes a deep gulp, the water sweet on his parched tongue. The possibility of the offering being drugged seems so unimportant in that moment. As he gorges himself on water, he studies the man now settled on the edge of the bed. He’s a lanky thing, with cheekbones that could cut glass and eyes to make a cat jealous. Actually, cat-like would be a good general descriptor. Or maybe snake-ish. Tony can’t quite decide.

Eventually he lowers the goblet. Green-eyes takes this as an invitation to speak.

“I have many questions now that you are awake, Midgardian.” Green-eyes stands, gesturing with his hands like a professor in lecture. “You were on the brink of death when you arrived. I required many hours to heal you. How did you sustain these wounds? How did you come to be here? What of your armor? I have seen nothing like it in all of Asgard. And what is that light in your chest? How did you craft it?”

Tony frowns, prickling at the interrogation.

“Asgard? What, are you LARPing or something? Look, I appreciate the water and bed uh, sir, but A: alien invasion, believe it or not; B: no idea; and to the final ones, a resounding ‘none of your business’.”

He hoists himself up with surprising ease and tries to slide onto his feet, only to have Green-eyes latch onto his arm and hold him in place.

“Do not strain yourself,” the other chides. “Your body is fragile. Do not waste my healing by breaking yourself again.” Tony jerks away, the muscles of his clenched jaw jumping. Green-eyes lets him go, but he hardly seems contrite.

“I’ll do whatever I damn well please, got it?” Tony spits, seething. He hasn’t listened to instruction
in years. Like hell is he going to listen to some stranger.

This earns him only a laugh that runs over his nerves like sandpaper.

“Such spirit! You are fine company indeed for a mortal.”

“Should I be offended? I think I’m offended. Fuck off,” he snaps in response, snatching up his helmet. He’s in no mood to deal with this. The eyes light up in greeting, and something in Tony’s chest unclenches. JARVIS, at least, remains with him. “I saw my city die, princess.” He spares his nurse only a glance before busying himself ensuring that JARVIS’s sanctuary remains intact. “My home. My own people- the people who were on our side- sent a bomb at us, because- I don’t know. They thought it would stop the aliens. Then, suddenly, I’m here in fairyland, and you- what are you even doing here?”

Green-eyes tilts his head and spreads his hands in consolation. “Midgardians are not permitted within Asgard’s walls. But I am well known for trickery. I passed your appearance as an illusion and hid you here, out of sight.” He clasps his arms loosely behind his back, watching Tony like an interesting bug. “I healed you. I washed the blood from your face, but you…” He trails off for a moment, then shakes his head slightly. “You did not react… well. Your construct recommended I induce sleep. I apologize for this. It was not my intention to frighten you.”

“Construct?” Tony repeats, turning the helmet in his hands. His metaphorical hackles are still up, and there’s an itching under his skin, a nervous energy. He needs to get back. Back to his home. He can’t just hide away here- wherever here really is- while his home is under attack, even if New York is nothing but a smoldering ruin by now.

“I believe ‘construct’ is the local terminology for artificial intelligence,” JARVIS interjects from the helmet’s speakers. Tony glances down again, mouth twisted in a frown.

“How would you know?”

“Mr. Odinson and I have spoken to some effect while you were incapacitated. It would appear that while artificial intelligence is not common on this planet, it is not unheard of.”

Tony blinks owlishly.

“Planet? This planet?”

“Part of one,” Green-eyes corrects, watching Tony curiously. “Asgard is all that remains. How would you come to be here without knowing this?”

“An entire planet of Vikings?”

“You know what? Nevermind.”

He staggers over to what he assumes to be a drape-covered window and pushes the shimmery fabric aside. Outside it’s… very gold, as though no one had gotten the memo that hey, gold is too soft and expensive to build an entire city out of. Unless it was an alloy, in which case maybe- Hold the phone.

“This is cool and all- Viking Planet Asgard, who’d’ve thought?- but there’s an invasion happening on Earth, so… How do I get back?”
“No one from another realm is waging war on Midgard. I do not understand your haste to return.”

“Look, Green-eyes, whether you understand or not, my home is under attack.” Tony strides across the floor to the bookshelf, then jerkily swings back around to the window, running his thumbs across the helmet’s ridges.

“Truly,” Green-eyes insists. “Midgard suffers no attack. It is, in fact, in no more a state of turmoil than usual. I was there myself not three eves ago for a blessing of longboats.” He frowns. “They prayed to Thor, but he would have nothing of it. The boats were meant for exploration, not war, you see.”

“Yeah yeah, sounds interesting, but seriously. It’s 2015. No one uses longboats anymore. Drop it.”

Green-eyes gives him a long, odd look.

“By the measure of your people, the year is 812.”

“That can’t be right.” Tony rubs his jaw, licking his lips to moisten them. “Look, just, tell me what was going on last time you were on Earth- sorry, Midgard.”

“The Nords are venturing into exploration. The Tangs have created money of paper. Charlemagne has-“


Chapter End Notes

So, Tony Stark appears to need a way back to the future.

I don’t know what the vikings contemporarily called themselves. I don’t know what the people of the Tang Dynasty era called themselves either. So I winged it. Let me know if you’re a history buff and can tell me this. Red_Dragonn was kind enough to give me their two cents on this.

Also, I like to think of Loki as awkward and rambling sometimes. The silvertongue name is well-earned, but young Loki is still prone to chattering.

One last thing: I’m well aware that the Julian calendar (used here) was not the only calendar in use at the time, but for sake of expediency, we’ll pretend it was.

Comments and Kudos are encouraging and appreciated. Thanks for giving this a shot!
Two

Chapter Summary

Loki has an Idea. Tony is introduced to magic. He'd probably be a bit more interested if he wasn't focused on, you know, getting home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Loki (that’s Green-Eyes’s name, turns out) wants to know what Back to the Future means. Tony ends up settling on calling it a play in which a kid goes back in time and meets his younger parents. Except, Tony seems to be about a millennia or two too early to meet his own parents’ younger selves. Loki questions him on how he managed to jump back in time, but Tony doesn’t have a clue. Maybe the nuke ripped a hole in the fabric of time. Seems like maybe someone would have noticed that little side effect by now, but hey, stranger things have happened. Maybe not, anyways, but without any way to replicate the situation, Tony is stranded. But then, Green-Eyes has an idea.

“There is perhaps one who might help you return to your own time. She is also the least likely to have you executed,” Loki just tosses out there, like it’s no big deal. Because, hey, apparently humans aren’t allowed in this shiny city. Vikings only. And, oh yeah. To get to this mysterious ‘One’ who can supposedly help Tony, they have to wander through an entire palace filled with Asgardians. So, no pressure or anything.

Maybe Tony would feel a little more secure if he had, say, his suit, but Loki refuses to give it back. He does, however, move his hands like he’s casting a net over Tony. Supposedly, the hand-wavy hoodoo is supposed to keep Tony safe. He doesn’t feel very protected, but what other choice does he have? Loki insists that whatever he just did will keep Tony safe, and given that Tony is operating in completely foreign territory, he goes along with it and follows Loki out the- who’d’ve thought- golden doors.

The hallway outside is very glittery, par-for-the-course, and as they walk, no one pays any attention to them. Tony, curious, even goes so far as to wave a hand in front of one armor-clad guard’s face, but nothing. Either they’re like the British queen’s guard, or Tony’s invisible. When no one else is in sight, Tony trots up to Loki and stage-whispers,

“You’re telling me how this works, later.”

Loki merely smirks and carries on.

Tony becomes lost within a few turns. Everything looks the same to him, but Loki seems to know where he’s going. Lo and behold, they eventually come to a stop outside another door, and Loki knocks three times, then opens it a hair.

“Mother?” he calls softly. “I require your assistance.”

Mother? They’re going to Loki’s mom for help? Loki, for his part, pushes the door open fully and strides inside.
The door leads to a bright room, which appears to be missing its outside wall. Instead, the room opens directly to a balcony overlooking an ocean or lake of some sort. Tony can’t tell which. It’s a big body of water, one way or another. Feather-light tapestries rustle softly against the wall as a warm breeze drifts in. A massive, ornate wooden loom rests in the center of the room, and before that, sits a woman.

She had a timeless look to her that makes it difficult to tell if she’s young or old. Two long, thick rope braids drape over her shoulders, and with her strawberry-blond hair, she’s reminiscent of someone he really can’t afford to think about right now. Judging by the circlet on her brow, she’s some sort of royalty.

“Loki, who is this?” she asks, rising from her cushioned stool. She holds out her arms, and Loki approaches her, placing his hands around hers.

“This is Tony Stark. He is of another time. He wishes to return to his own time. Can you help him?”

Loki’s mother lets go of his hands and gestures for Tony to come closer. The genius obeys.

“How come she can see me but nobody else can?” he asks, hooking his thumbs in the pockets of his tattered, rumpled pants. Loki had given him a tunic-looking thing to wear, but Tony had insisted upon keeping the pants. No leggings for him, thank you very much.

“Mother taught me everything I know of magic. It is not often that I manage to truly conceal anything from her.”

“At least, that’s what he would like me to think,” Loki’s mother corrects. She regards Tony appraisingly. “Welcome to Asgard, Tony Stark. I am Frigga. A man out of time, you say. I don’t see that very often.”

Tony perks up at this.

“But you’ve seen it before, right? So you can help me?”

She smiles sadly at him.

“Unfortunately, I cannot.” She gestures to the tapestries all around the room. They shimmer in the sunlight, almost seeming… alive. “To send anything through time beyond the natural order of things, a hole must be created in the fabric of existence. They form from time to time on their own, but those are unpredictable. To create one yourself would be to court the destruction of all we know.”

Which is… bad. That definitely sounds like a Very Bad Thing, one way or another. On one hand, he can’t get home. On the other hand, he could destroy the universe. Not good choices.

“Well I guess I’m stuck then,” he growls, throwing up his hands. “I guess it’s not the end of the world, except, oh wait, it is. No offence to you or your planet, but I can’t stay here. I don’t want to stay. Being human is a crime here, for god’s sake.”

“Peace, Tony,” Frigga shushes. She gestures to Loki. “We will keep you hidden until we can find a better solution. For now, yes. You must remain here, but there are ways to work around the ban of Midgardians. The law states that no one from your realm may step foot within Asgard. You, however, are of nowhere that yet exists. No law has been violated. Remember this, and you will remain safe.”
“But we will protect you as long as possible,” Loki adds. “The dull-minded halfwits out there are easily fooled.”

Frigga rolls her eyes. It’s obvious that this particular attitude is nothing new.

“So you keep me hidden, and I say I’m from nowhere. Great. Check. That’s it?”

The woman shrugs, folding her hands before her.

“I’m afraid so. Sending you home could destroy everything.”

So that’s it, then. He’s stuck. Stranded. But hey, at least he has a few centuries before the world ends.

Tony’s not sure how to feel about that.

Chapter End Notes

Just a quick update. Since my classes start on August 11th, I won’t be able to update frequently or regularly. My plan is to update multiple chapters, once every handful of weeks or so. It’ll be pretty sporadic, for which I’m sorry, but I’m not going to drop this fic.

There’s no beta (although I’d love to have one), so there are bound to be mistakes. Please be gentle.

Comments and Kudos are cherished. I try to be as interactive as possible with people who leave comments!
Three

Chapter Summary

Tony settles into his new home, sort of.

Chapter Notes

I now have a lovely beta! Thank you to Loopage for helping me out with this.

Also, just a reminder: I can't keep a regular update schedule now that college has started up in full, but I'll try not to drop this fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The current plan is to keep Tony hidden from the rest of Asgard until they can think of a better idea. Which, unfortunately, might take a while. Tony isn’t sure how Loki and Frigga think they’re going to be able to prevent anyone in an entire city-planet-thing from catching wind of an illegal alien, but apparently it involves setting up some sort of cot in Loki’s room, and a flat, round amulet carved out of a dark bluish rock. Frigga tells him that the rock will act like the- Tony doesn’t want to call it a spell, but what other word is there for it- spell that Loki performed on him earlier to keep him out of sight, but this one won’t need to be reapplied, so long as he wears it. The catch is, that the pendant won’t mask any sounds he makes, and while he won’t cast a shadow, he can leave footprints. The amulet isn’t a perfect solution, but it definitely helps.

Frigga promises to look into time travel when she can- because hey, maybe there’s a way to send him back to his doomed home without shredding existence. For the moment, the queen shoos Tony and Loki out of her weaving room with cryptic parting advice: avoid Odin at all costs. The human opens his mouth to ask just who or what this Odin-person is, but Loki shakes his head minutely. Speaking during the walk over had been a risk. Best not to tempt fate again. All it would take to expose Tony is one word caught by a passing servant.

So Tony keeps quiet and follows Loki back to his princely chambers. It’s a little weird. For a prince, Loki isn’t very respected. Very few passers-by even acknowledge his presence. Loki doesn’t seem terribly ruffled, so maybe that’s just how things work in fairy-land.

No one spares them a second glance. Or, more accurately, no one spares Loki a second glance. Tony, for all intents and purposes, is not there. They slip silently through the glimmering halls and back to the room Tony woke up in.

No sooner than the door shuts behind the unlikely pair does Loki snap his fingers, and out of the corner of his eye Tony sees a shimmering patch of space, like the air above hot pavement in summer. He turns his head, trying to catch a proper look at whatever’s going on, but the phenomenon ends as quickly as it began. In the corner, wedged between a massive bookshelf and the tall windows leading out to the room’s own balcony, sits a little daybed. Functional, inconspicuous, and designed to fit in, the daybed is just the type of thing that any visitors would ignore. Whelp, looks like that’s going to be Tony’s bed. Tony crosses the floor and drops the
helmet (and, by extension, JARVIS) onto the newly-formed bed.

“How did that just happen?” he demands, turning around to face Loki, who’s-

Not there, actually. Huh. Tony’s temper flares up again.

“So what was all that about helping me out if he jumps ship right away? I mean, is that the plan? I’m supposed to sit around in his room like a pet?” he grumbles, flopping out on the daybed. He lifts the helmet again, tracing the damage with his fingers. It’s… repairable. Probably. Maybe. Tony just wishes he had access to his workshop.

“Perhaps that is a question you should direct towards Mr. Odinson when he returns,” JARVIS prompts. Tony sighs, and sets the helmet on his chest. At least JARVIS answered one unspoken question, albeit unwittingly. Odinson, son of Odin, and all that jazz. He’s supposed to avoid Loki’s old man.

“Yeah, and I need the suit back, too. I didn’t think to make the helmet chargeable on its own.”

He purses his lips, staring up at the ceiling. If the helmet runs out of power, JARVIS will still be fine. Just… asleep, until the helmet comes online again. Tony simply doesn’t want to be disconnected from the AI for any period of time. JARVIS is all he has left.

Thinking about the suit has Tony standing up again, placing the helmet back on the cushions. Maybe Green-Eyes has the suit stashed around here somewhere… Hmm…”

Tony sticks to Loki’s rooms (yes, rooms. Plural. As in, more than one), unwilling to try his luck outside just yet. But one thing leads to another, and Tony’s innocent quest to find the suit morphs into flat-out snooping, much to JARVIS’s loudly-unspoken disapproval.

All of the obvious places for hiding a suit of mechanized armor are checked off pretty quickly. Door number one? A bathroom. Door number two? Some sort of dressing room. Behind the curtains? A lovely view, but no cigar. Under the bed? Dust bunnies. All in all, a fruitless search. Tony can’t be blamed for not wanting to merely sit back down.

So yeah. He starts rummaging through drawers, rifling through books, just sort of… snooping. What of it?

For all that the rooms look neat and tidy, the drawers are a different story. The ornate wood of a desk hides piles of clutter, like Loki had simply swept everything out of sight. Tony finds glass jars of colorful liquid- probably ink-, scraps of what feels too soft and thick to be paper, both ragged and nearly-pristine notebooks, and a whole bunch of other crap. He even discovers a set of feather quills. Quills!

The bookshelves are interesting too. Not a single one is in English, which is weird, given that both Loki and Frigga spoke English. That, come to think of it, is also a bit odd. Why does Loki know modern English if he’s a space-viking over a thousand years in the past? There are so many questions that need answering.

When he turns around, Loki is there. Like, right there. Tony nearly runs right into him. He leaps back as if burned, slamming against the bookshelf.

“Holy fucking shit!” he gasps, clutching at the arc reactor. “Where the hell did you come from?”
Loki, for his part, simply looks amused as he steps out of Tony’s personal space. He gestures vaguely to the door.

“Outside, Tony. Do keep up. Did you find what you were looking for?”

There’s not exactly much Tony can say in response to that, so he ignores the question. Loki lets the matter drop. Tony brushes past the prince, and immediately draws up short.

“Why is there food here? How did you bring all that in without making a sound? Christ, you need a bell.”

Not only had Loki snuck up behind Tony, he had also managed to set up a table in the middle of the floor and deck it with a ridiculous amount of food. All without making a sound.

“Magic,” Loki quips back, wiggling his fingers. He looks delighted by Tony’s bewilderment, like a kid on Christmas morning. “I thought you might be hungry. You have yet to eat.”

Which, okay. He has a point. Tony hasn’t eaten since… since at least a day ago. Maybe a little more. Things are a little fuzzy in his memory. Tony drags the desk chair over to the table and drops down into the seat, reaching for a loaf of soft bread. Loki pulls over his favored armchair to join him.

Loki seems content to let Tony cram food into his mouth, so they sit in silence for a time while the human wolfs down the offered meal, and the prince nibbles at morsels. When Tony finally sits back, folding his hands behind his neck, he looks Loki over.

“Yes?” Green-Eyes tilts his head curiously.

Tony leans forwards, placing his hands on the wood.

“Magic. Let’s talk about magic. Sound good?” Loki gestures for him to continue. “You brought this stuff in with magic. You fixed me up with magic. You made me invisible with magic. So what is it? How does it work? Explain it to me.”

Loki grins, wagging a finger.

“Ah ah ah, Tony. As I seem to recall, you refused to answer my questions. Why should I answer yours?”

Tony eyes the prince, gripping the edge of the table. Loki has a point. But The questions Loki had asked were personal. It wasn’t the same thing.

“You must have many questions, Midgardian. It is only expected. Yet I have questions as well. So I propose a trade.

Your story, for mine.”

Chapter End Notes

It’s a little short, so sorry about that, but I hope to get the next chapter up soon!
Chapter Summary

Loki and Tony trade questions and answers, and Loki messes up with coercive magic, just a little bit.

Chapter Notes

My concept of magic comes from Loki: Agent of Asgard, so there's that. I love that comic series. Thank you to Loopage for helping me out with this as a beta.

Eventually, Tony and Loki agree on this: they will trade questions. They can each refuse to answer any question, but doing so gives the other person the right to ask two questions in their next turn, as opposed to the usual one. The second two questions are mandatory. To prevent lying during those questions, Loki suggests he cast a compulsion spell to force the truth. Tony doesn’t like the sound of that, but Loki casts it before he can object. Loki, in return, allows Tony to go first. He figures, might as well start off slow, so he begins with a simple question, just to test the waters.

“So Frigga’s queen here. You’re her son. That makes you a prince, right?”

Loki snorts, obviously not impressed.

“Of all the questions you could have asked, you pick one with an obvious answer. Yes, Tony. I am indeed a prince.”

“Hey, I’m just warming up. I don’t want to scare you off too soon,” Tony retorts.

“How noble of you,” the prince drawls. He leans forwards in his chair. “Now I believe it is my turn. How did you acquire the light in your chest?”

Tony visibly flinches.

“Next question,” he snaps. So much for warming up. The prince doesn’t seem put-off by his refusal at all.

“Very well. Are you the creator of your armor?”

There doesn’t seem to be any harm in answering that one, and Tony can feel the answer on the tip of his tongue anyways, urged on by that damned spell, so Tony complies.

“Yeah, I am. I’m still waiting for you to return that, by the way. Now, how-”

“Ah ah, Tony. I have one more question. Why did you create it?”

“To see if I could.” Tony shrugs.
Loki taps his fingers rhythmically against the dark wooden table.

“You would do well to remember that I am well-versed in the art of lies. Try again.”

“Fuck off. I wasn’t lying. Your truth-hoodoo makes sure of that, doesn’t it?”

“And yet, nor were you telling the whole truth. I will endeavor to answer your questions fully; grant me the same courtesy. Try. Again.”

Tony glares dagger at the unruffled prince. It’s still all a touchy subject for him, but he also wants his own questions answered, so he relents.

“I was in a bad situation. Built a suit to get out of it. When I thought I was safe I built a new one, because I knew I could make it better. There. Happy, your highness?”

Loki tilts his hand side to side, in what is apparently the universal and timeless gesture of ‘so-so’.

“Not particularly, but I suppose it will do for now.”

“Why thank you,” Tony grumbles sarcastically. “How did you get me from the market-thing to here? It was like teleportation or something.”

“It suppose you could call it that. The branches of Yggdrasil stretch through all existence. Traveling along those branches is always faster than moving through space. Nearly instantaneous, in most cases.”

It sounds like Loki is talking about teleportation, which, hey, cool. It’s a technology that Tony had wanted to develop himself, in his younger days, but he honestly doesn’t understand. Loki’s going on about trees and egg-something, but all Tony gets is ‘teleportation’.

“Alright, we’ll come back to that later.”

“It is a difficult concept for mortals to grasp. Don’t feel bad.” Loki grabs a piece of bread and asks, “Why will Midgard be invaded in your time?”

Tony shrugs.

“Don’t know. I wasn’t exactly making conversation with the aliens when I was on earth. They just showed up one day, filled the sky with massive ships. Maybe they were supposed to conquer. Maybe they were just supposed to destroy. Didn’t make a whole lot of difference to me.”

Or to the people who died. A lot of people died. Will die. Whatever. As far as Tony is concerned, there was no reason for it.

“Take heart, Tony,” Loki says quietly. “There is much time before the invasion of your home. Preparations can be made to defend Midgard.”

“Sure, maybe. But how do I know I haven’t created a paradox? Back on Earth, there’re- will be- at least a hundred different books and movies on why going back in time can fuck things up. Let’s just keep going, alright? Alright.” Tony lets out a tired breath. “I know I had at least a few broken bones.”

“Three fractured ribs, your wrist, and your ankle,” Loki helpfully supplies.

“...Yeah, that. But now-” He rotates his wrist. “-it’s all better. You say you did it. How?”
“Magic.”

“Yeah, you’ve said that. But how does that work?”

The prince considers this.

“I am not as adept in the healing arts as, say, Mother, but I know enough to convince your body that it was whole again. What is Midgard like in your time? Before the invasion?”

It’s not as in-depth of an explanation as Tony would like, but he accepts it for now. He’ll get Loki to elaborate next time.

“Uh, highly-populated. Over-developed. We keep trying to blow each other up. I don’t… really know a whole lot. I mostly holed myself up, towards the end.”

“Why?”

Tony swallows thickly.

“I… lost, everyone,” he tries, the words cumbersome in his mouth. A man I was very close to betrayed me. My two best friends died. Things got… bad.”

Loki looks like he wants to inquire further, but Tony cuts him off.

“You got two questions. Now I get two. How do you and Frigga know my language, and how does this whole magic thing work?”

The prince visibly bites his tongue. He’s obviously curious, but Tony has no desire to go down that road of questioning. Especially not with a truth-compulsion on him. Loki sighs and pops a chunk of bread in his mouth. He takes his sweet time to chew and swallow before addressing Tony’s questions.

“I am not speaking your language. I speak the tongue of Asgard. There is a phenomenon unique to very few races- the Aesir being one of them- known as Allspeak, by which we hear our language no matter who we speak to. It works both ways. Others with whom we speak will hear their own language as well. Perhaps you may come to develop the Allspeak someday too. It is not unheard of.

“As for the Magic, every mage, sorceress, and wizard has their own explanation and thinks it to be the best existing one. Mine is this: anyone able to use magic, is able to catch the attention of the universe. They tell the universe a story. This story is their will, and it is told so well, with such conviction, that the universe believes, even for a moment, that the magic-user speaks the truth. For instance, when you were lying broken, I told the universe you were whole, and so whole you became.” Loki’s eyes shine. “Perhaps I can teach you, if you like. Provided, of course, that you teach me about your creations.”

Tony blanches a little at that, but he forces himself to relax. Loki isn’t asking him for weapons. There’s not anything to be afraid of here.

“Yeah, sure. Sounds great.”

“Tell me of the friends you lost? How did they die?”

Immediately, the inventor feels like a bucket of ice has been dumped over his head. The budding interest from before is gone. He stands abruptly, knocking over the chair.
“Next question,” he croaks. Loki remains seated, utterly unruffled.

“Very well. What is the light in your chest, and how did it come to be there?”

“Uh, uh. No no no. You already asked that, and I said no.”

“Correct, but we have not agreed on any rule stating that a question may not be repeated. You must honor our original terms.”

Tony grinds his teeth stubbornly, clenching his fists. His fingernails dig red crescents into his palms, but damnit, he can feel the words being pulled out of him.

“Fine, you son of a bitch,” he spits. “It’s an arc reactor. Made it myself. It keeps metal out of my heart. Woke up one day to shrapnel and a car battery in my chest and made this thing to replace the battery. I can’t get rid of it. Happy?”

Tony turns away, running shaky fingers through his hair. He turns his back on Loki and crosses the room.

“I’m done. Congratulations. There’s my story.”

“Where are you going?” Loki calls as Tony pulls open the fucking heavy door. He has to use his whole weight to make the thing budge.

“Dunno, princess. No one can see me, so it doesn’t matter, does it?”

Loki lets him go, for which Tony is glad. He can feel himself shaking apart like a glass vase in an earthquake. Everything smells like dirt and sand, and he can still remember-

No. Bad. Those are bad memories, and not ones he wants to drag to light, but there they are, and Tony struggles to breathe properly. He breaks into a run through the halls. Maybe someone will hear him. Maybe it’s best if someone does. He wasn’t supposed to survive the cave, Obie, the bomb. It wasn’t supposed to be him and yet here he is with so much blood on his hands and why can’t he breathe?

The gold is as yellow as sand as he runs and runs and runs, and he doesn’t quite know where he’s going so long as he’s moving, because maybe he can outrun what hurts.

He can’t run forever, and eventually he drops down into a corner that smells like dirt and damp and humidity, and tries to stop the hurricane in his mind.

The man presses a trembling hand to his hollow chest, right over the reactor. The place where his heart should be, if he had one. He’s pretty sure there’s nothing actually there. He’s going to die; he’s going to die; he was supposed to die-

He notices someone beside him, when he lifts his head. He doesn’t know how long he’s been sitting there, but his joints definitely feel stiff. Damn, he’s getting old.

The air is tinged with the scent of flowers, although there is an earthy undertone to it as well. Tony looks around with bleary eyes to find that he’s in some sort of greenhouse. Plants hang from the ceiling and drip from tall tables. Loki is there, sitting beside him. Christ. The asshole just won’t leave Tony alone.

“Have you recovered yet?” the prince asks. Tony snorts derisively.
“You’re so full of shit. What do you care? You got my story. What now?”

Loki twirls his hand, and several fragrant blossoms detach from their plants. They drift over and dance around the prince’s hand.

“Nothing, at the moment. As you say: I got what I wanted. I will not apologize for that. I simply did not expect your reaction to be so severe.”

“Great, thanks. Let’s just drop it, okay?”

Tony is tired. He’s tired, and his chest still hurts, and he really just wants to hole up and lick his wounds, but no. Loki pushes onward.

“There is no shame in such response. Even the greatest warriors of Asgard are known to suffer such afflictions.”

Hot shame and quiet resentment bubble up in Tony.

“Drop. It,” he snaps, drawing his knees up to his chest. “Just, forget about it, okay? Don’t bring it up again, and I’ll pretend you aren’t a complete bastard. Deal?”

Loki inclines his head.

“Yes. Deal. I give you my liar’s word, for whatever it’s worth.”

Loki isn’t exactly instilling Tony with loads of confidence, but it’s better than nothing. He can feel the bitter self-loathing starting to creep in, and he wants nothing more than to be left alone to wallow in it, preferably with lots of booze and maybe a warm body picked up at a club or party, but Loki is the only one around, and Tony doesn’t have the energy to move. He closes his eyes and leans back against the stone of the wall he’s chosen to collapse against.

“I’ll take your liar’s word for whatever it’s worth. And you know what? I’ve got a way for you to pay me back.”

“Hm?”

Tony wiggles his fingers.

“How about those magic lessons?”
Hey guys! Sorry for the massive delay. As it turns out, I can't balance college with writing a fanfiction, so this will be updated in the summers. I'll try to make it worth your while!

Also, I found the theme song for this work, and I adore it. It's called All is Hell that Ends Well by Two Steps from Hell. I'm trying to put together a spotify playlist to link here for the work, but definitely check out that song.

Loki is behaving like Christmas has come early this year, and it’s freaking Tony out.

The prince—a trickster, Tony recalls from some vaguely-remembered TV show or another—is grinning broadly. Tony gets the feeling that he should be expecting something to go horribly, horribly wrong. Right now, though, all Loki’s actually doing is setting one of his flowers adrift in the greenhouse. It stops about a yard and a half away from the two men, maybe another yard off the ground, and holds its position, shivering delicately from time to time. Loki turns to look at Tony expectantly.

“What?” the human asks defensively, hunching his shoulder slightly. Loki gestures to the flower.

“Get it.”

“The flower?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You want to learn magic, and I will teach you magic. Get the flower.”

Tony casts a sidelong glance the prince’s way. Loki seems placid and content, complete with an air of self-satisfied smugness, and he’s still playing with the rest of his flowers, sending them this way and that with a flick of his hand.

“How is this supposed to teach me magic?”


“Fine. Whatever. But just for the record, I think you’re crazy.”

Loki snorts. “You are by no means the only one.”

Tony chooses to ignore that, and slowly makes to stand up, but a strong, surprisingly-cold hand latches on to his arm and pulls him back down.

“No, stay. You can get it from here.”
“Look, Green-Eyes. Hate to break it to you, but my arms aren’t long enough.”

“What bearing does the length of your arms have on this? This lesson is one in magic, not in reach.”

“Well then how do you propose I go about magically grabbing the flower?”

“Convince the realms that the flower is in your hands.”

Oh. Was that all. Tony lets out a breath. He really hopes Loki isn’t fucking with him right now, because the whole communing with the ‘realms’ sounds like a fat load of bullshit. Commune with the universe. Convince the universe. Use the force, Luke…

Tony stretches out a hand for good measure, and concentrates. His brow furrows as he thinks, picturing the flower in his hand.

Hear that, Universe? It’s right here, in my hand. Get with the program and make it so.

The flower is right there, in his hand. It’s going to be there. It’s…

Not there. Awesome.

Tony lets his hand drop fixing the elusive flower with a stern gaze.

“I think the universe is ignoring me,” he remarks, rubbing the reactor absently. “How do I get its attention?”

Loki ponders this, pursing his lips. He goes without answering for long enough that Tony feels the urge to hum the Jeopardy theme, but the prince pipes up before he can.

“I do not know,” he finally admits. “Magic has always come naturally to me. I have never needed to put effort into transmitting my will.”

“Uh-huh. Good for you. And what about us common folk? Any ideas for me?”

“Let me think.”

Far be it from Tony to disturb a prince in thought, so he quiets down, eyeing the floating flower. It drifts placidly through the air, ruffled by the barely-there breeze. Tony tries the whole ‘visualizing it in his hand’ thing again, but the flower stays stubbornly put, mocking him.

Fuck the flower.

“What if I don’t want to learn anymore?” Tony asks.

“That isn’t an option,” Loki scoffs. “You said you wanted to learn magic. No backing down now.”

With a barely-there woosh, a ball of crackling green light bursts to light between Loki’s hands. Tony flinches away from the sudden apparition before curiosity wins over. He reaches out to touch it.

“What is that?” he wonders, grazing his fingers across the insubstantial thing. It feels like warm water, almost bubbly, like soda.

“Cold fire. It will burn your hand to nothing before you feel anything,” Loki answers serenely.
Tony swears and jerks his hand back, checking it over for damage. Loki cackles, delighted.

"Peace, Tony. I jest."

"Ha-ha. Let’s scare the guy with the heart condition."

The prince rolls the ball of light between his hands. "Touch it again. Learn the feel of magic, and then try to call the flower to yourself again."

It sounds like another load of bullshit, but Tony’s already taken the first steps in this whole song and dance, so he might as well keep going. He eyes the ball, and extends his hand once again.

This time, he sticks his whole hand inside the ‘magic’. Despite Loki’s assurance that he was joking, Tony’s hand does feel like it’s burning. Only, not in a bad way. The feeling creeps up his arm and settles in his chest; it feels like he’s holding a star. It’s warm and buzzing with energy, and as curious as Tony is about this magic stuff, the magic seems to be curious about him too, like an inquisitive bird. It’s bizarre.

"This might sound crazy, but I think your magic’s checking me out," Tony whispers.

Loki tilts his head back and laughs again, like Tony’s told some hilarious joke. Tony, for his part, doesn’t get it.

"Ha ha ha. Care to let me in on the joke, buddy?"

"It is trivial, I assure you. Did you honestly expect magic to be unresponsive?"

Tony stares at the prince.

"Uh, yeah, actually."

Tony had been thinking of this magical force as he would electricity. A type of energy that could be used to get things done, but wouldn’t exactly look back at him, so to speak. Although, sticking him in a ball of something akin to electricity wasn’t the best of ideas. It doesn’t really matter anyways, because this stuff is nothing like electricity. Electricity doesn’t reach out to you like a friendly cat greeting a newcomer.

Loki vanishes the energy ball. Tony is left feeling oddly bereft as he cradles his hand to his chest. He wants that feeling back.

"That is the sensation of magic. Recreate the feeling, and call the flower to you."

The blossom is still drifting in the air, undisturbed.

“Alrighty then. Once more with feeling.”

He tries to recall the feeling of the energy mass, tries to call it back, tries to force the magic to come. It’s no more effective than his first attempt, except this time Tony can sense something slippery and elusive on the edge of his consciousness, and he wants nothing more than to drag Loki into his lab and compile data on this weird magic phenomenon. Unfortunately, he’s just left with trust and feelings, neither of which is something he’s good with.

Then, something clicks. There’s a pop, a flash of blue, and then…

The flower is floating an inch from Tony’s nose. It’s blackened and smoking, but there it is. Tony grins, the hollowness in his chest filling with a faint glimmer of excited pride.
I did that. I did do that, right?”

Loki inclines his head in affirmation, and Tony swats the charred flower to the stone beneath them.

“Hell yeah!”

“I suppose I should be grateful I did not choose a lizard, or a mouse for you to practice on,” the prince muses, eyeing the smoking remains. “Or anything valuable.”

Tony is inclined to agree on the animal thing. An exploded rodent would be a little gross. Just a bit. Loki claps his hands, and brings another flower forwards.

“Alright, do it again. Except perhaps this time, try not to burn it.”

Tony burns it.

He doesn’t mean to, of course. It just sort of happens. And then it happens again. And again. And again.

Tony is exhausted by the time Loki calls and end to their lesson. He doesn’t know why, because he’s been sitting still for three hours, but sweat is trickling down his neck. He lets his head fall back against the stone wall, rubbing absently at the reactor. The greenhouse smells of smoke now, although the stubborn aroma of flowers still lingers, doggedly wafting from the army of plants remaining.

“I suppose you’ll get it eventually,” Loki concedes. The prince seems entirely underwhelmed by Tony’s progress, but the inventor is just happy to have been able to do anything at all. It’s a step in the right direction towards understanding this so-called ‘magic’.

“Hey, setting a flower on fire with your mind might not be a huge deal to you, mister high and mighty, but this mere human is fucking ecstatic.”

Loki starts rising to his feed in one smooth, elegant motion.

“I would be far more impressed if I actually saw the fire rather than just the crumbling ash.”

“Yeah yeah. Let me bask in the glory of the moment, you spoilsport.”

Tony struggles up as well, dusting off his pants. He leans against the wall again, for just a moment. He takes a step forward, places his hands on the small of his back, and stretches. A twinge of pain flares to life beneath his ribs, and Tony grimaces, hunching slightly in reflex. Loki looks at him curiously, but Tony ignores the unspoken question. Wonder of wonders, Loki doesn’t press.

The walk back to Loki’s room is a quiet one by virtue of Tony’s exhaustion. The prince tries to prod him into conversation once they’re behind closed doors, but Tony waves him off.

“Mmm, later. Tired now.”

Tony flops out on the narrow little bed that Loki had magicked into the corner, and curls around the helmet: his only connection to JARVIS. He’s out like a light, leaving Loki standing bemused and vaguely irritated.

Chapter End Notes
Here we go again! I'll try and update weekly, but don't get too worried if I miss a day or two.

Comments are adored, as are kudos! They let me know that there's an interest in seeing this continue.
Tony wakes with a start, the taste of blood and sand thick in his throat. His heart thuds painfully against the metal casing of the reactor, and he lays there, still and quiet, until the shivers wracking his body settle and eventually stop. JARVIS flashes the helmet’s eyes at Tony, a silent reassurance. The man swallows dryly, closing his eyes, and tucks his chin down to his chest. There he remains, balled tightly around the suit’s helmet until he begins to feel a little more human, for whatever that’s worth on a planet of aliens.

“What time is it?” he mumbles, tapping the helmet for emphasis.

“I cannot provide an accurate time for this region,” JARVIS replies regretfully. “However I believe it to be late evening.”

Tony grunts his thanks and unfurls himself with a groan. He has become incredibly proficient at avoiding the old sharp-toothed memories that like to haunt his mind, but there’s nowhere to run when he’s asleep.

There’s also apparently no way to avoid them when some Harry Potter wannabe smacks him with a ‘truth spell’ and a game of 20 Questions. Tony has decided not to hold that against Loki. Best not to burn all his bridges.

With stiff limbs and an aching back, Tony sits up. He yawns, scrubbing calloused hands across his face. He needs to shave, he decides, rubbing his jaw. Like, wow. He may have a short-haired animal living on his face.

The urge to shave lasts about ten seconds. That’s how long it takes Tony to realize he would have to find Loki and ask about razors and then actually shave, and if he shaves he should probably be careful about it, and all motivation just kind of… drains away, and he’s left feeling empty again. Great. Nothing unusual. He stands, pops his back, and freezes, spine arched and hands on the small of his back.

There, in the corner of the room, stand the armor. Well, most of it.

Tony has the helmet, and more than a few panels of the outer shell are missing, lost in another… what? World? Universe? Time? Whatever. They’re gone, wherever they are.

“Oh baby, I was so worried about you,” he croons, hefting the detached helmet in his hands as he beelines to the battered suit. The suit’s reactor glows steadily behind its cracked casing. He runs his thumb over the fractures; when he draws his hand back, a thin line of red wells up from a fine cut on the pad of his thumb. He sticks the digit in his mouth and turns his attention to the helmet latches.

The latches are fucked up. He must have had to force them open. The good news is, the data ports and charge ports are intact, so if he can balance the helmet just… there.

“Connection established, sir. Shall I begin preliminary diagnostics?” JARVIS chimes. The helmet eyes glow.

“Yeah, let’s do that.”
While JARVIS runs system diagnostics, Tony takes stock of the damage he can see, mumbling to himself as he makes a mental list. He suddenly longs for his workshop yet again. After Obie’s betrayal, Tony allowed no one but himself into the space. It was safe. He could lose himself in work and tinkering and creation and he would be safe. Here? Not so much.

That doesn’t really stop him from disassembling as much as he can by hand, though. Which admittedly isn’t much. The emergency latches for manually assembling and disassembling the suit have obviously been tampered with by someone with no idea what they were doing- definitely Tony’s fairytale prince- but they work, and before long Tony has all the pieces spread out on Loki’s fancy rug. JARVIS takes his time connecting to the remote sensors of each piece, compiling data. The process would go by faster if the components were still physically together, but Tony wants to poke and prod at the inner workings. His fingers itch for a set of pliers and a microwelder. Maybe a wrench and hammer too. As things stand, he can’t do much more than eyeball the components and wait for JARVIS to give him more details.

He loses track of time, puttering around with the armor. The opening of the bedroom door startles him out of the headspace he’s slipped into, and with detached interest he notes that his fingers are stained red. Huh. Must have pricked himself somewhere along the way. Tony wiped his hands clean on his pants and fixes a lazy grin on his face.

“Hey there princess. Welcome home.”

“Welcome home indeed. I see you’ve decided not to twiddle your thumbs,” the prince remarks dryly, brushing the ruler-straight hair from his face. He looks decidedly harried.

Tony leans back on one arm, studying Loki.

“Fun day at work?”

“As fun as it can be to be dragged along all afternoon to watch Thor make a fool of himself chasing barmaids.”

“Scandalous. Bar-hopping before nightfall?”

Loki rolls his eyes, sitting down on the edge of his bed.

“No time is too early for ale, if Thor is to be believed.”

“And Thor is…”

“My brother.” Loki steeples his fingers, a sly glint in his eyes. “I saved you from becoming intimately familiar with his hammer upon your arrival.”

“Oh thank god. It’s awkward when you accidentally touch a stranger’s hammer.”

This earns Tony a snort of laughter.

“I suppose purposeful hammer-touching is alright then?”

“Oh yeah. So long as everyone is in agreement,” Tony amends, throwing a wink in Loki’s direction.

“Best to keep that sort of touching to a minimum here.” Loki leans forwards, and inquisitive frown on his face. “What’s all this then?”
“This, my green eyed princess, is my greatest and shittiest invention, reduced to scrap.”

“Mmm. And why are its innards smearing grease on my hand-woven, priceless elven rug?”

As much as Tony wants to say it isn’t so, Loki is right. The battered suit is badly damaged, and joint lubricant glistens on the red and gold outer shell in places.

“In my defence, a priceless anything shouldn’t be on the floor in the first place.”

“Excuses excuses,” Loki dismisses, drawing a huff from the inventor.

“Yeah, well. If I had the parts and tools I could fix it and save your precious carpet, but I don’t so I can’t.” He wipes the stubbornly-beading blood from his hands again, but this time the motion catches Loki’s keen eye.

“What have you done?”

Loki slides off the bed and approaches Tony, crouching before him. HE reaches for Tony’s hand, but the inventor recoils, gaze shuttering. To Loki’s credit, the prince pauses.

“I don’t want to be touched right now.”

Loki visibly swallows his curious words, but to his credit he simply nods and straightens.

“You’re still filthy and bleeding. I think it’s time for you to wash up.”

“Yes, mom.”

Tony allows himself to be ushered to his feet and guided to the attached bathroom. He gravitates towards the tub, already stripping off the oil-streaked tunic. No knobs or dials are immediately apparent, but Loki shows him how to bring up a display that blooms like a hologram and feels like glass beneath his touch.

“How does this work?” Tony asks, derailed entirely from the possibility of a bath. He slips his fingers through the inch of space between it and the rim of the tub of the bath, looking for whatever is holding the very-physical screen up, but it seems to be floating, which is exciting. The man mimics the motion to bring up the display, ad it vanishes without a trace. On and off and on again, and ooooh what does this button do?

When Tony remembers that there’s a viking standing behind him, he looks back to see Loki standing there, watching him with a bemused expression.

“Mind if I take apart your tub?”

“I’d prefer you didn’t,” comes the dry response. “Now get in the bath before I throw you in myself.”

“Why Loki, how forward of you.”

This earns Tony a roll of those green eyes.

“Bathe.” Loki’s hand lingers on the door frame as he pads out, and with the closing of a door Tony is alone.

He fiddles with the tub, filling it with warm water. Tony doesn’t very much like water, though. HE hasn’t quite gotten over learning how water absolutely should not be used on humans, so the dip he
takes is short and rushed. His gracious host seems surprised to see Tony out so quickly, but hey, at least he’s clean and dressed in the clothes that appeared on the polished countertop.

A plate of food is waiting for him, and yeah, they’re gonna have to come up with a new method for getting Tony his meals, because being fed like a pet is going to get really old, really fast.

He sits down anyways and clears the plate, and when he casts a sidelong glance Loki’s way, the guy is staring, obviously just waiting to be notices. A cheshire cat grin splits the prince’s face when their eyes meet.

“So fucking creepy,” Tony mumbles around his half-chewed bread. Loki isn’t at all chastised. The genius puts the empty plate back where he found it, and he relaxes back into the chair he’s seated upon. Tony fixes his eyes on Loki.

“So let’s talk. Today was fun and all, but sitting in a greenhouse and tinkering in your room aren’t going to cut it. I need tools, materials to fix the suit, and I can’t stay cooped up in your bedroom. I’m not your pet rabbit.”

The prince ponders this, and nods to himself.

“Tell me what you need for your ‘suit’. I have need of new mixing vessels. Tomorrow I shall purchase them from the market, and I will bring you your materials as well.”

“Mixing vessels? For what? Baking?”

“Poison.”

Loki doesn’t miss a beat, and Tony really can’t tell if he’s joking. It does become abundantly clear, though, that Loki has no idea what Tony means by ‘thermocouple’ and ‘gasket lining’ when the inventor tries to explain what he needs. Tony huffs a sigh and throws up his hands.

“Look, just lend me some money and I’ll get it myself.”

Loki brushes the suggestion away immediately.

“Impossible. You would be exposed as an outsider at once, and in any case I doubt you even know how Asgardian currency works.”

It’s an asshole way to say it, but true, so Tony doesn’t comment.

“Then what do you suggest, huh wise guy?”

The glimmer in Loki’s eye almost feels like an answer in itself.

Chapter End Notes

So Tony's starting to feel a bit like a pet, and he doesn't like it. Wonder if he'll ever be able to go out and about all by himself?

Comments and Kudos are so very appreciated. They encourage me to keep going.

Also! I now have a tumblr page dedicated to supplementary material for this story.
Check it out at steppingstonesbetwthestars.tumblr.com.
Seven

Chapter Notes

So it's time for a market trip! Not everything goes as planned, though, but sometimes everything works out for the better.

Check out my blog of supplementary material:
https://steppingstonesbetwthestars.tumblr.com/

Tony isn’t sure how he feels about Loki’s masterplan. One the one hand, it’s fucking awesome. Where did all his mass go? Loki says ‘magic’, but that doesn’t really explain anything. On the other hand… he no longer has hands. He’s coiled around Loki’s arm, testing his new body in lazy clenches of muscle.

Currently, Tony is a snake. A bright, emerald green one. Tony isn’t sure whether he’s venomous or not, but he kind of hopes he is. That would be so badass. He isn’t about to test his teeth on Loki, though. That might get him dropped, and he’s having to focus enough as it is on simply corralling his long, noodly body into remaining around Loki’s forearm. He doesn’t want to think about how difficult actually slithering somewhere would be.

(He’s not going to talk about Loki’s laughter as he flopped about in surprise, trying to move nonexistent limbs, or the way he had to be manually wrapped around Loki’s waiting arm.)

It’s kind of a shame, though, that he can still feel phantom pains of the arc reactor, despite the fact that he’s pretty sure it’s not technically there. The way Loki explained things earlier that morning, you can’t actually metamorphosize someone with a permanent, inorganic object fixed on their body. You’d be more likely to kill them than to succeed in changing their form. Loki claims to have found a work-around, though he refuses to share that particular secret. Long story short, he’s not dead, and both reactor and shrapnel are simultaneously there and not. Schrödinger would be proud.

Tony’s tongue flickers out, tasting the air as Loki steps outside the palace walls. The bright sunlight is heaven on his cool skin, but the sudden influx of noise and motion startles snake-Tony, and he balls up, tucking his head away within his coils. Loki’s laughter vibrates through Tony’s jaw, and though he can’t actually make sense of Loki’s words with the version of ears he currently possesses, the fancy All-Speak thing translates nicely into his head.

“Did that scare you?” the prince teases, flexing his wrist. Tony squeezes Loki’s arm in response. They worked a system, before leaving Loki’s room. A two-second squeeze translates to yes, while a soft tap on the arm with Tony’s tail means no. Communication beyond that is pretty difficult, given the whole lack of vocal chords.

Loki does all the walking, but together they wind their way through white-paved roads. The buildings are tall and flowing, as if they had been planted and grown rather than built. Color is a little weird with Tony’s new eyes, but he’s pretty sure the whole damned city is gold. Yeah, he’s
guilty of using gold in his designs as well, but at least his work is *classy*. Asgard looks like a leprechaun threw up everywhere.

While Tony judges the architecture, they come upon a large, open space filled with noise and movement that honestly could have been invigorating, had Tony not been a two-foot-long snake and therefore easily crushed. He tenses, tasting the air, and the touch of a smooth finger running along his coils startles him into balling up again. Loki sighs.

“Relax,” he soothes. “You’re alright. We’re almost there.”

They slip past booths of people haggling over spices, past thick bolts of fabric, past leaning shelves of glistening crystals. When Tony can smell metal on the air, he lifts his head, swiveling around to see what he can find.

With Tony as his reptilian guide, Loki purchases spools of coated and bare wire, pliers and cutters, a little welder that apparently doesn’t need fuel, and a whole host of other things, each of which is vanished to who-knows-where. By the time Tony has found all he can at the open-air market, his mind is racing, planning out everything he can do with his limited supplies. Loki thanks the last tradesman, and begins to walk deeper into the sprawling market.

“There are many more specialized shops in the smith’s district, but I think this will be a good start,” the prince chats, apparently unconcerned by how odd it must look to be talking to a snake. Tony is glad that Loki isn’t self-conscious. He likes the chatter.

He kind of stops paying attention once Loki begins haggling over fancy, polished stone bowls. Instead, Tony takes advantage of the relative stillness to carefully, cautiously take his temporary body for a test run. He doesn’t need to signify yes or no anymore, so why not? Loki doesn’t seem to mind either. He allows Tony to slink clumsily up his arm, to the small golden plates decorating his shoulders. Being out in the sun has warmed the plates, and Tony just can’t *resist* coiling precariously upon them. Right now it seems like a good idea.

It continues to seem like a good idea right up until Loki takes a step back, only to collide with someone rushing behind him. This wouldn’t have been much of a problem is Tony had just stayed on Loki’s damn arm, but *nooo*. He had to explore, and that means the bump has him toppling from Loki’s shoulders.

He’s caught by an unwitting woman with violet-tinged skin, and is promptly flung away with a horrified screech. Tony is helpless to do much but try to protect his head as his body collides with a vase on display. Both he and the vase topple to the ground, and the glazed clay shatters like a gunshot and-

Tony is disoriented from the fall. He expects the ground to be hot but it’s cool and why can’t he move his legs? He thrashes and flounders away, finally managing to coordinate his muscles- and that’s right, he’s a snake- enough to slither in the direction he thinks Loki is, but calloused hands scoop him up. The owner of the hands shushes at him, wrapping his body around their arm. The inventor lifts his head to see a woman peering down at him, and he looks instantly away, trying to seek out Loki, but he doesn’t recognise the area around him. Damn. He must have moved farther away rather than closer to the prince.

Escaping back to the ground puts him at risk of being crushed, so Tony stays put, and silently hopes that somehow, Loki will find him. He doesn’t really want to spend the rest of his days as a snake.

“Let’s get you out of here, little guy,” he hears from far away, and he lays his head back down,
resigning himself to another journey.

As his unexpected hero leaves behind the noise and confusion, Tony calms down enough to really begin paying attention to the area around him. He commits each and every turn to memory. At the very least he can backtrack later and just hope no one else pitches him face-first against a solid surface. His well-meaning hero ducks into a run-down courtyard in a less ostentatious part of town. There’s less gold around here, and more bare stone. A bulky bag, previously unnoticed by Tony, is unshouldered and dropped to the ground of a dimly lit room with the tell-tale clang of metal on metal. Now that’s interesting.

The inventor is deposited safely within a deep, scratched glass bowl, which has been pulled out and dusted off by the woman carrying him. He balls up, unhappy with the confinement, and watches his savior-turned-captor light lamps around the room one by one, until there’s enough light supplementing that filtering in through closed windows to light the whole place, and hey, would you look at that.

Tony almost can’t believe his lucky. True, he’s trapped in a cloudy, uncomfortable bowl as a scaly spaghetti, but of all the people to be snake-napped by, Tony happened to fall into the hands of a smith.

Blacksmithing entirely by hand is not Tony’s strong suit, but he recognizes the hook rule and taps and of fucking course the anvil and hammers. He periscopes upwards, trying to peer over the edge of the tall bowl, but the smith comes back and slides a weighted lid over the bowl, leaving only a crack for air. Tony flicks his tongue out in annoyance.

“I don’t know shit about snakes,” the smith informs him as she unties her black, slightly frizzed hair. It drops down around her shoulders, and she combs through it with her fingers. “I’ve got a friend who keeps reptiles though. They just live on the other side of the city. You’ll be fine there overnight, right?”

It’s clear that the smith doesn’t expect a response. Why would she? Tony’s a snake, for fuck’s sake. He settles down to wait. As cool as it is to have found a smith- or, to have been found as it were- he needs to go. Loki is the key to getting back to his limbed body, not to mention the suit and magic lessons.

In the end, Tony doesn’t need to escape. Loki comes to him.

There’s a knock at the battered door, and when the smith goes to answer it, abandoning her evening meal, there stands a very irritable prince. The piercing glare he’s sporting has the smith wilting back, but she stands her ground.

“Good evening your highness. Can I help you?”

“Yes.” Loki’s voice drips with icy disdain. “You appear to have stolen my snake.”

“Stolen your… Oh! That’s your snake?”

The smith steps aside to invite Loki in, and Tony sprawls against the scratched glass for attention. The prince zeros in on Tony immediately and rescues him from the class prison. Loki makes to storm out of the smithy, but the bold smith catches the prince by his sleeve.

“Unhand me,” Loki hisses, jerking away. The smith places her hands on her hips, unimpressed.

“Take care of your pets,” she counters. “I didn’t steal your snake. I rescued it. It could have been crushed if I hadn’t picked it up.”
Loki regards her coldly, which Tony thinks is kind of bitchy, but he can’t say as much at the moment.

“Mind your tongue. I thank you for your concern, but you are in no position to chastise me.”

Like the drama queen Tony is realizing Loki is, the prince storms out, letting the door slam closed with a bang.

Back in the palace, it takes an hour of frustrated insistence to convince Loki that no, he didn’t deliberately slither away to risk being trampled or, oh I don’t know, thrown against a pot. Finally, though, Loki is appeased, and Tony is gifted with the little treasures found at the market. Thus begins Tony’s end of the bargain.

As he slowly, painstakingly repairs what he can, Tony explains the workings of his suit. He is careful not to give away too much, but if Loki has a question, Tony has an answer. The only misstep he makes is mentioning the possibility of finding that smith and making the custom parts he needs.

“No. Absolutely not.”

This has Tony pausing.

“Uh, excuse me? Sorry mom. I’m a big boy. I can make my own decisions.”

“Tony, be reasonable. If you are seen, you will be executed.”

“Yeah, but if I can make the parts I need I can protect myself.” Tony doesn’t look up from the split he’s welding closed. He’s already made up his mind. Loki’s rival stubbornness doesn’t faze him.

“The danger is too great. You will remain out of sight where it is safe.”

See, this has been going on for a good half hour now. It’s late, Tony’s energy is flagging, and honestly? Neither of them is gonna budge.

“Look, I’m going to go find that smith. I’ll take my chances.”

“No. I forbid it.”

That’s the last straw. Irritation morphs into anger, and Tony shuts off the welder, casting it to the ground.

“Oh, you forbid it, huh? Good for you. I’m going to bed. Goodnight.”

Loki immediately tries to draw him back into conversation, but Tony is good at giving the silent treatment, if only for a short while. He climbs into his bed, knowing that his messy state is going to bother the prince, and resolutely tunes the other out.

Forbids it, huh? We’ll see.

Chapter End Notes

The smith meant well, but she simply had no way of knowing that Tony isn't really a
Also, don't take your pet snakes out to crowded areas. Typically don't take them outside without taking precautions to ensure they don't escape or get attacked by something. Also, bowls are in no way suitable habitats for snakes.
Eight

Chapter Notes

I always give myself seven days to write a chapter, but inevitably I write the majority between the hours of 11 pm and 3 am the night before posting. Oh, the joy of procrastination.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Loki sets him up with a stack of books, a sheet of crystal that translates the written word into language understandable by the user, and an order not to leave the room without supervision. Like he’s a goddamn toddler. Or a pet, the little bitter voice whispers in Tony’s head. He makes a show of sitting on his ass and being a good boy, and Loki, satisfied, leaves.

Tony gives him about twenty minutes before he abandons the books and pads to the door. It’s unlocked-score and Tony wraps his fingers around the pendant. Time to test his luck.

He steps out into the empty hallway and takes advantage of his isolation to step boldly, without fear of being heard. This changes of course as he moved from the quiet place around Loki’s room to the bustling central halls. Walking right under the noses of armed guards without anyone being the wiser is kind of fun, actually. He gets to tap into his inner spy. Tony ‘James Bond’ Stark. Or maybe that’s not the best comparison. Mr. Bond tends to blow stuff up, and while Tony likes fireworks, this might not be the best time or place.

Tony has a few near-misses, but he makes his way outside. Unfortunately, it’s the wrong outside.

He must have gotten turned around, because Tony now finds himself in a garden. Tony pauses, blinks, and frowns. This isn’t exactly where he wanted to be. Tony looks back over his shoulder, debating whether he should backtrack, but he decides to push onward. He is definitely on ground level, so maybe there’s an exit to the streets somewhere further on.

The garden starts off as a stone path winding through thick greenery. There aren’t really hedges persay, but the flora is dense enough to block his line of sight. Before long the path opens to a reflecting bond of blue water, surrounded by flagstones, and Tony freezes. He isn’t alone anymore.

There are two people sharing this space with him. One, Tony presumes to be a gardener, given that they’re dressed for work and discussing “Moose-pull-hame climbing roses”. The other, to his relief, is Frigga. Her strawberry hair is piled up on top of her head, and it stays impressively in place as she glances up at Tony. A small smile graces her lips. Tony gives a little wave. The gardener pauses and follows the queen’s line of sight, but their eyes slide right over Tony.

Tony himself scans for an exit, but short of going back the way he came, his only real option is to slide by the pair before him and move deeper into the garden, but he’s leery of doing so. Unless he’s completely silent, the gardener is definitely going to hear him pass by.

Frigga seems to see his plight. She stands from her bench, straightens her dress, and gestures for the gardener to come along.

“Walk with me,” she murmurs, looking directly at Tony again. The gardener seems a bit startled,
but obeys without question. Tony follows as well. He maintains a respectable distance, but keeps Frigga in sight. The pair continues discussing bloom season and mature height and root space, and Tony is a bit out of his depth. He’s pretty glad he’s not participating in the conversation.

His heart leaps when a door comes into sight, offering Tony an escape from the walled garden. Here, Frigga pauses, gesturing to the curtain of ivy clinging to the stone around the door.

“Clear the icy from this wall and plant roses instead. You say they come from the poles of Muspelheim? I think it will do well here.”

As she speaks, her hand brushes over a circular panel embedded in the door. The panel shrinks, morphing from lavender to silver, before expanding again to its original size. The gardener doesn’t notice, but Tony does. When Frigga and the gardener wander off again, Tony tries the door. It opens, and he says a silent thank you before slipping away outside.

It takes a fair amount of navigating to find his way back to the market, though he doesn’t dare enter for fear of colliding with someone in the crowded place. From there, he sets out to find the smith.

Several wrong turns, a fair amount of backtracking, and a hefty dose of guesswork later, Tony finds himself standing before the arched door leading to the open forge, and huh, Tony could have sworn there was a roof yesterday. The smell of smoke and hot metal fills his nose, and he ducks inside. The sound of metal ringing on metal is even louder in here. He’s greeted with the sight of someone hunched over the glowing forge, swinging a hammer with enviable precision against a glowing length of metal.

Admittedly, walking up behind her, pulling off the pendant, and shouting ‘Hey!’ to be heard over the din isn’t the smartest idea, as he learns when the smith rounds on him, hammer in one thickly-gloved hand and glowing metal in the other. Her hair is pulled back in a messy knot, and thick goggles protect her eyes. She looks decidedly displeased.

“What the fuck, man? By the nine, you nearly scared me out of my skin!”

The smith twists to the side and dunks the metal in a vat of water, prompting a hiss and a billow of steam. She tears off her gloves and slaps them on a table as she passes by.

“Yeah, I’m sorry, it’s just-”

She waves her hand, cocking her hip against the table.

“Are you here for a commission?” she interrupts, hope glimmering in her brown eyes.

“No, I-”

Her expression falls, quickly replaced by wary irritation.

“So he sent you then? Damnit, I told him I can do this. If he’d just listen to me, I swear-”

It’s Tony’s turn to interrupt.

“What? No! I don’t know a Snorensen. I’m… I’m looking for an apprenticeship, actually.”

This seems to draw her up short, and she pauses, crossing her sooty arms.

“You. You want an apprenticeship. With me.”

She looks over him skeptically.
“Yeah? You got a problem with that?”

“I don’t know where you’re from, but you don’t look like you’ve worked a day in your life. And your palace clothes are shitty for real work. You don’t seem the type.”

Tony frowns. Well… okay. Maybe he’s not as fit as he once was but he needs this, dammit. He opens his mouth to reply, but the smith approaches him, pulling the goggles away from her eyes. She tilts her head to the side, reaching out towards his chest. Tony catches her by the wrist, meeting her eyes.

“What is that?”

He follows her eyes down to the flow of the arc reactor through his tunic.

“That,” he begins, “is an arc reactor. Trade secret. I’m an inventor, but I’m a really fucking long way from home. I don’t know how to make what I need. I can’t pay you, but look at it this way. You teach me, and I provide free labor.”

He looks around the workspace, taking in the cot shoved in the corner and the cluttered mess of someone stretched too thin. She follows his faze, mulling over his request, before fixing him in her sight again.

“Inventor, huh? You got anything to show me? Anyone to vouch for you?”

Tony has to shake his head, and the smith seems displeased, but in the end she bites.

“Free labor, huh?”

Chapter End Notes

Audrey Ramirez from Atlantis is the inspiration for the smith. Trying to find PG fan art of her on Tumblr is nearly impossible. It's all either screen caps or porn, which is disappointing.
Chapter Notes

So! To clear up a question: Most Asgardians can tell if someone is from a different realm via a sort of aura around the person in question, in the same way that we can usually tell if someone isn't from our home area by their accent. The reason the smith didn't immediately know he was from Earth, though, is the same reason that we might not be able to tell exactly where someone is from based on their accent. We know that they certainly didn't grow up where we did, but we aren't familiar enough with every type of accent to pinpoint the exact origin. So the smith knows Tony isn't Asgardian, but she can't tell which realm he's from. The palace guards, however, would be able to tell, because they've been trained to identify where visitors are from.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The smith’s name is Unnur, and she immediately sets Tony to work.

Cleaning.

Not exactly glamorous work, but it’ll hopefully put Tony in her good graces, so as Unnur begins the process of reheating her metal, Tony tidies up. He isn’t a complete stranger to housework, but suffice to say, billionaires don’t often have to clean. Still, Tony does his best, hiding things away where he thinks they’re supposed to go, wiping the fine layer of soot away from surfaces, even straightening the blankets on Unnur’s cot. Why Unnur lives in her forge, Tony doesn’t know, but he doesn’t think he knows her well enough to demand answers yet.

The forge is sweltering, and the lack of a roof doesn’t help. If Tony had designed the place, he would have left the ceiling for shade and knocked out a wall instead, but at least puffy clouds drift by from time to time. The actual temperature doesn’t drop, but even so any relief from the sun is welcome. This doesn’t change the fact that Tony is dripping sweat by the time he thinks he’s done.

Unnur had left off banging on metal an hour ago in favor of kicking back and watching Tony work with a delighted gleam in her eye.

“I could get used to having someone do my cleaning,” she remarks, rolling a speckled yellow apple between her gloveless hands. “Don’t worry though. I’m not going to waste my first apprentice on chores.”

She hops off the blessedly open windowsill and takes a bite of the apple as she approaches Tony, who stands dusting off his hands. Unnur circles him, eyeing Tony up and down with critical regard before coming to a full stop in front of him. The apple crunches as she takes another bite. Tony’s stomach growls in response, and though Unnur cocks an eyebrow, he ignores his burgeoning hunger. The smith doesn’t call him out. She speaks around her mouthful of apple.

“You’re kinda soft-looking, but I’ll give you this: you’re damn determined. Thought you were going to turn up your nose at something as lowly as cleaning.” Her free hand forms air quotations around ‘lowly’. She swallows her mouthful. “I like you. Get here at the sky’s first pink tomorrow. And, uh…” Unnur gestures vaguely with the apple. Start putting on some muscle. This isn’t easy work. Now get out. I have work to do, and I can’t have you cluttering up my space. Tomorrow, sunrise, practical clothes. Got it?”
“Loud and clear. I’ll see you tomorrow, uh, Unnur? Am I allowed to call you Unnur? Or should it be Master? Ma’am, maybe?”

The smith rolls her deep brown eyes.

“Call me ‘ma’am’ again and I’ll take a hammer to your fucking head. Call me by my name, you ass.”

The words are spoken without real malice, so Tony flicks his fingers in farewell.

“Ciao, Unnur.”

Tony ducks out of the sweltering forge, wiping the sweat off his face. The amulet goes back around his neck, and with that Tony is once more invisible.

Looking up, the palace is kind of hard to miss. It looms over the city, so Tony is pretty sure he can find his way back. He debated exploring a bit, but eventually decides against it. Tony’s questionable luck has already been pushed pretty far with this excursion, and the inventor really would rather not have an angry space prince coming out after him. He decides to head back.

Exploring can wait.

Tony reenters the palace through the massive open front doors. Probably not the smartest move, given he has to dance around oblivious passers-by and hope no one touches him, but he manages to get through it having only brushed up against two people. Both instances could easily be attributed to someone else, though, so Tony thinks he’s safe.

Asking Loki for help procuring work clothes is out, given the way he reacted to Tony’s mention of finding someone to help him make parts. That leaves Frigga as his only source of aid. Which Tony really doesn’t mind. Frigga has some sort of air about her that makes her seem trustworthy and very… motherly.

He thinks he remembers the way to her weaving room, and thinking that he can perhaps wait for her there, Tony sets off. The shimmering halls quickly have Tony all turned around, much to his frustration, but he does manage to stumble into the right room. The missing wall is still missing, and when it becomes abundantly clear that Tony is alone in this room, he ventures outside onto the balcony.

Tony props his elbows on the carved stone railing and attempts to enjoy the view, but despite the beauty of the sun on water, Tony quickly becomes bored. He returns to the room of gauzy tapestries and ambles around. The tapestries are… weird, to be blunt. They shimmer in the afternoon light, iridescent in places and nearly glowing. Tony sees yard upon yard upon yard of interwoven figures of plants and animals, glimmering bands of woven knots tying them all together. Tony can’t help but feel, however, that there’s something he’s missing. He feels like he’s looking at one of those pictures where if you let your eyes unfocus and tilt your head just right you’ll see a hidden image, plain as day. He just… can’t figure out how to make the hidden images pop.

The tapestry is soft beneath his fingers, and as light as air itself. Tony strokes the fabric in wonder. His fingers catch on a warped spot, where the tapestry thread seems to be coming loose. Damn. He hopes he’s not the one who causes the budding run. Although… now that he’s looking Tony sees a bunch of those little runs and fraying patches. Huh. Weird.

A light rap on the doorway draws Tony out of his reverie. He turns to see Frigga enter, hands folded before her.
“No need for you to knock,” Tony says, sliding his hands in his pockets. Or… trying to. The tunic doesn’t actually have pockets. “It’s your space, not mine.”

“I didn’t want to startle you,” she explains, approaching. “Why have you sought this place out? You do not strike me as a weaver.”

What is it with these people and assuming what he is and isn’t?

“You’ve got me there. Never used one of those in my life.” He gestures to the loom. “Uh, actually I was looking for you. I need a few things and I don’t want Loki to know.”

Frigga laughs. “Oh? Are you at odds already?”

“Sort of. He wants to confine me to his room because it’s safer, but I’m gonna go crazy is he keeps treating me like a fucking pet. Oh, sorry.”

“Does this have anything to do with your trip through the garden this morning?”

“Yeah. Thanks for that, by the way. I found someone who’s going to teach me how to manufacture the parts I need to fix my armor. I just need some more practical clothes.”

“You are a smith?”

“No, an inventor. I need to learn how to be a smith. Can you help me?”

“Yes. Clothes are easy enough to come by. The difficulty lies in working around my son. He has developed a predilection for being overprotective, I’m afraid.”

“I noticed.”

“Well then. While we think on that…” The queen waves a hand, and with the faint rattling of porcelain a table appears and sets itself on the balcony. “Tea?”

Tony never developed a taste for leaf water, but it’s difficult to say no to Frigga. He tries to feign interest as he sits down across from her, but the most interesting thing on the table is the array of crumbly cookies piled on a place. Frigga pours the tea into squat porcelain bowls, and when the lifts the liquid to her mouth and drinks, Tony follows suit and nearly gags. It’s bitter and acidic, and it occurs to Tony that he has no fucking clue whether or not this tea is toxic to humans. He sure hopes it isn’t because he has the sneaking suspicion that spitting a mouthful of tea into his cup with the queen right there could be considered a little bit impolite. He forces himself to swallow with what he hopes is a smile.

“It’s good,” he manages, voice cracking.

“Oh, wonderful. It’s my favorite blend. My uncles send it to me from Vanaheim each year.”

Frigga seems awfully content given that Tony is sure he isn’t being very convincing. In the time it takes Tony to force down one serving of tea, Frigga swallows three cups of her own, and she seems to savor every mouthful. Tony is just reaching for a cookie to wash the godawful taste from his mouth when the door bangs open.

“Mother you must help me. I cannot find the errant fool.” Loki paces the length of the room, coattails fluttering around his legs. The prince gesticulates wildly as he talks. “What if he had been discovered? What if he is lost? What is he-” Loki finally looks out onto the balcony, right as Tony stuffs a cookie in his face. “Is here. What- why is he here? You said you hadn’t seen him.”
“Hey Princess,” the genius mumbles around his mouthful of absolutely divine cookie. He swallows thickly, licking the crumbs from his lips. “Mom and I were just chatting about clothes.”

“Clothes…?” Loki shakes his head, stalking towards the table. “Where have you been?”

Chapter End Notes

Unnur's name was almost Gudfried 'Call me Goodie' but I've read a book where a character was named 'Goody Goblin' and I just couldn't get it out of my head.

By the way: Sorry that it's a little late. Here's a little spoiler as an apology: Idunn is bisexual.
Chapter Notes

Hi! I'm back! Sorry for the wait. I try to update weekly but I just started getting more hours at work on top of my internship, so I'm basically working from 10 am to midnight each day. Doesn't leave much time for writing:( As an apology, though, I'm opening up a poll. You can vote to decide which kid of Loki's I draw. The poll is open now and will close June 29th at midnight. The art will be posted on my tumblr and here (if I can figure out how) On July 6th. You don't have to give any information other than who you'd prefer to see.

Poll
Tumblr: steppingstonesbetwthestars.tumblr.com

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To be honest, Loki looks kinda scary in a… weirdly not-frightening way, but Tony can’t focus on that at the moment. He’s been around for too long to let some spoiled prince intimidate him, and he’s the king of bullshit, baby. Fast-talking is what he does best.

Tony kicks back, biting a crescent into another cookie.

“You’ll have to be more specific, buddy. I’ve been lots of places.” He taps his chin thoughtfully. “Tokyo, New York, that kick-ass resort in Nassau.” The cookie snaps neatly between his fingers. “Let’s keep going, shall we?”

“Please do,” Frigga hums, sipping her tea. Loki makes an indignant sound like a soaked cat. Tony lunges gleefully into his list.

“Dubai, Bordeaux, Oahu, and Vienna. Vienna’s nice. I’ve been to Stockholm and LA, Washington- the state and the district- Bali and Brazil, Italy- Oh I’ve been to lots of places in Italy-”

“Tony.”

“-Venice, Pompeii, Milan, Florence- Then there’s Bedarra and Fiji and-”

“Tony.”

“-the Maldives- the Alifu Atoll, actually- I’ve been to Thailand and Botswana and- and to several deserts. Brussels, London, Tennessee, Miami, Silicon Valley, Montreal-”

“Tony! For the love of all that is good would you shut up?”

“No-puh.” He pops the ‘p’, looking Loki dead in the eye. Though technically Loki is in the position of power, looming over the table, Tony is perched like a king. “If you wanna treat me like a pet, fine, but I get to choose what I am. I’ll be a parrot. Loud, obnoxious, and never shutting up. Now let’s see… There’s a coffee place near Mercer Street, a college in Massachusetts, Walmart, a Denny’s, your bed-” He waggles his eyebrows, just to watch Loki’s mortified eyes flick to Frigga, then furiously back at Tony. “It’s a very nice bed too. Perfect for two people. I bet you could
even-"

“Al-right, that’s enough,” Loki hisses. His fingers dig painfully into Tony’s jaw and, to be frank, the prince’s hand is squashing his nose. The inventor does the only reasonable thing.

He lick’s Loki’s hand.

The prince reeks back as though burned, aghast.

“You licked me. You insufferable-” Loki cuts himself off and takes a deep breath in. “Don’t lick me again.”

“Not unless you ask for it,” Tony agrees. He senses a ‘fuck off’ in his future, but with Frigga right there Loki censors himself. Frigga, thank anything and everything, is unruffled by Tony’s brashness, which is good. He doesn’t want her to think he’s coming onto her son right in front of her, especially when he’s only trying to distract from his forbidden escapades. “So anyways, I’ve been to Atlanta, I’ve been to-”

“What about today?”

“Today? Your mom showed me around some garden today- by the way, I want to know what Moose-pull-hame roses are- and later I got lost in the palace. Wandered around ‘til I got back here. Happy?”

Loki studies him critically, arms folded. He doesn’t seem happy at all.

“You’re lying.”

“What? No I’m not. I’m hurt. Shocked, and hurt.”

“A lie of omission is still a lie.” Loki presses a hand to his own chest. “I am the god of lies. Don’t think you can-”

“Now that’s a lie,” Frigga interrupts, setting down her tea bowl. “You are the god of mischief and chaos. And fire, depending on who you ask. You just happen to be very good at lying.” The queen’s fond disapproval is palpable. Loki flaps a hand in response.

“Semantics. The point is you’re leaving something out and I want to know what.”

“Well you’re not gonna know what, got it? I’ve known you for what, two days? You don’t get to police me, babe. Even if we were more familiar, I’m a big boy. I can make my own mistakes. I don’t have to sit, stay, and roll over just because you’ve got anxiety over me being found. Sorry, don’t want to hurt you, but you don’t have the right to dictate anyone’s life based on your fears.”

Tony finds himself standing, which he doesn’t realize he was even doing, but whatever. Loki is still a good six inches taller than him, but Tony has perfected the art of towering over the taller.

“I am trying to protect you,” the prince seethes, and Tony plants his hands on his hips.

“Good for you. Really appreciate it. Fuck knows I need people on my side. Now protect me without controlling me, m’kay?”

He’s been alone, sitting on his ass for four years. Suddenly having a stranger hovering over him like a helicopter mom is suffocating, to say the least. Loki needs to back off.

“What you don’t comprehend is that you will have no chance, if Oword of your presence reaches
Odin. You will not be given the opportunity to defend yourself. He is judge, jury, and executioner, and his trials are damnably quick.”

There’s a bitterness in his words, but Tony doesn’t focus on that. He opens his mouth to snap back, but Frigga clears her throat.

“What?” they growl in unison. Tony and Loki both freeze moments later, their brains catching up to their mouths. Shit. Tony just sassed the queen, arguably his most helpful ally so far. Frigga simply folds her hands in her lap.

“Given that neither of you are children, I’m sure all this is heading towards a compromise, correct? You know, a give and take? Like rational adults do.”

Tony notices that Frigga isn’t exactly jumping to her husband’s defence, which either means she and Loki have argued over him before and she just doesn’t want to bother anymore, or... Loki isn’t exaggerating over the whole ‘judge jury and executioner’ thing. Tony’s instincts tell him to go with the second option. Hooray.

“What do you mean, compromise? He’s being an ass.”

“And you’re being a reckless fool.”

“Hey. Reckless fool is my middle name. No one asked you anyways.” Tony glares at the prince.

Frigga rises to her feet with grace, smoothing out her dress.

“Well then. I see you’re having such a meaningful discussion. I believe I’ll leave you to it. Until later, my boys.”

She leaves with a gentle rustling of fabric and the clink of her table vanishing. Tony fixes Loki with one more frosty look before moving to follow Frigga.

Only, he can’t move his feet. Tony can’t even wriggle his toes.

Well fuck.

“I’m still mad at you,” Tony prefaces. “But I can’t move my feet.”

Now that Tony can’t back up, he’s acutely aware of just how close he is to Loki. They’re practically toe to toe. Comprehension dawns on the prince’s face as he too attempts to move.

“Neither can I.”

What follows is a stationary dance that has to look fucking hilarious from the outside. Tony and Loki each do everything they can think of to get out of their fixed places, to the point where Tony actually unbalances and tips backwards, and Loki surges forwards to grab him by the front of his tunic and pull him upright again.

“Frigga did this, didn’t she,” Tony grumbles, simultaneously irritated and fascinated by the conundrum. On the one hand, he’s stuck inches away from the guy who’s already guilty of hovering like a mother hen. On the other, this is another example of that magic bullshit, and he still wants to know how it works.

“Most likely. I certainly didn’t, and I doubt any magic of your doing would yet be so strong.”

“...That stings. I’m hurt, princess. Really. Truly. So uh, how do we break the curse? True love’s
“First kiss?”

“True love’s what? No curse of any merit can be broken with something as trivial as a kiss.” Every word is dripping with disdain. Tony feels like he needs and umbrella.

“C’mon. It’s worth a shot. Pucker up, buttercup.”

Loki doesn’t find this as funny as Tony does.

“Kiss me and I will end you.” Tony shrugs.

“Fine, fine. Have it your way. What do you suggest?”

“As loathe as I am to admit it, I believe we must… compromise,” sniffs Loki. “As Mother insisted. But seeing as I am in the right, a compromise will be long in coming.”

“Seriously? You’re being creepy and overbearing and you know it.”

“I’m being sensible.”

“You’re being- ach. Forget it. We’re just talking in fucking circles.” Tony crosses his arms, bumping them against Loki’s chest in the process. “Let’s just think about this. Can it be any compromise or does it have to involve your hovering? Don’t give me that look. You hover and you know it. How about this. I’ll make your bed if you sweep the floors. Deal?”

Loki is staring at him like Tony is mad.

“Deal,” he responds slowly. Their feet, however, remain firmly planted.

They stew in silence, half in and half out of the weaving room. Loki caves first.

“I do not treat you as a pet,” he denies, sullen.

Tony sighs, deflating.

“Maybe you don’t mean to, but princess, you feed me, clothe me, and house me. I don’t like being a kept man, waiting for you to come home every day. That’s not gonna cut it for me.”

He’s done nothing but wallow in depression and self-loathing for nearly half a decade. Watching New York burn hadn’t exactly cured him- if anything his mental state had become worse for adding another trauma to his baggage- but it had been a kick in the ass and a wakeup call. He refuses to go back to sitting around and letting the gnawing apathy in his gut consume him again.

They both lapse back into silence, neither wanting to broach the subject further. It takes a good half-hour before either stubborn man speaks.

“I will tell you why I ‘hover’, but you must not speak of it again, or ask me any questions.” Loki’s voice is brusque and businesslike. Tony imagines that he can hear the crackling of ice in his tone.

“You got it. My lips are sealed.” Tony’s curiosity, however, is piqued. He’s also more than a little uncomfortable. He senses a touchy-feely conversation in the works, and Tony Stark does not do touchy-feely very well. “I’m all ears if it gets us out of this mess.”

Loki picks at his palm, looking down dispassionately at the inventor.

“There were six people I held dear, and I have lost each of them by Father’s hand. Four were
banished, two I know not where. One imprisoned. One relegated to little more than a pack animal. I could do nothing to defend them.” He cocks an eyebrow, lips downturned in carefully-relegated displeasure. “I do not know you, but you hold a star in your chest and make things I have never seen. I find you interesting, and I would like for you to not die. And if I could not save my- my six. Surely I must be able to defend someone without fail.”

Yep. Yep. Nope. Tony is totally not equipped for this. Loki is as aloof as usual, but if feels like he’s baring a piece of his fucking soul, and Tony isn’t ready for that from anyone. Time to swallow his pride and get out.

“Okay. So you couldn’t protect six people and therefore want to protect a stranger. Got it. Probably not the healthiest coping mechanism, but hey, we’ll roll with it. Look. What if we make a panic button. I get in trouble, I push the button, and it tells you where to find me. You guys probably don’t have GPS but we’ll figure something out. See? Compromise.”

Loki is silent for a time, which worries Tony. What if he demands more?

“I will refrain from using it to locate you without explicit permission,” Loki finally allows. Tony breathes a sigh of relief. Thank fucking Christ. He was getting worried for a second there.

“Good good good. Well, uh, I can move my toes again, so I’m gonna back up now. I’m all sweaty and gross, you know, so, uh, probably gonna go take a bath. Bye bye. See you later.”

Tony is man enough to admit that he runs away, leaving a startled Loki behind him. It’s a brisk walk, but the effect if the same.

He bolts.

Chapter End Notes

Kudos are lovely, but comments are even more encouraging!

Please remember to cast your vote here! If no one has any interest I probably won't do it.
Eleven

Chapter Notes

So! A whopping 15 people took the survey. 7 people asked for Jormungandr, 4 people asked for Hel, and 4 people asked for Sleipnir. I'm pretty surprised no one wanted Fenrir. The art will be up with my next chapter update.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They don’t really talk much after Tony flees. Tony isn’t neglected or anything. Loki isn’t petty enough to let him starve, and Frigga takes it upon herself to give Tony more than lounging clothes, but while the prince isn’t hostile, he’s definitely closed off.

Tony doesn’t understand why though. Loki’s the one who decided to overshare. They aren’t exactly friends, Tony reasons. Anyone would bolt is a stranger started talking to them about… whatever it is they were talking about.

Everything is fine, though. JARVIS wakes Tony an hour before sunrise each morning, and Tony dresses in his new clothes and slips out to meet Unnur. Sometimes Loki is still asleep, but more often than not he’s gone when Tony rises.

Unnur teaches Tony about her force, the first few days. What tools are and what they do, why coal is better than charcoal, how she’d set of a forge if she could afford more than her cobbled-together workshop, how wonderful it would be to own a self-forge, which turns out to be a sort of 3-D printer for sturdy metalworks.

“Good for producing lots of identical pieces,” she explains as they pump air over the glimmering coals. “I could churn out bigger commissions if I had one. A breastplate in an hour. A broadsword in half a day.” She sounds wistful as she waves Tony away from the billows. “Course, there really is nothing like making things by hand. Oh, sure self-forged armor does it’s job. It’s wonderful for purely physical pieces, but when you hold the hammer… You can pour your heart and soul into every unit cell. A full forge always has a mage to help in the more personal pieces.”

“How does a mage help if you want to make things by hand? Doesn’t that defeat the purpose?”

“Nah. The mage doesn’t actually shape metal. They lay sigils and charms and spells of protection and strength into the metal while the smith forges. Here, wipe that sweat off your face. I wish I could employ a metal maid. Every smithy worth its salt has at least one, but what would I even pay her? I’m barely scraping enough together to keep these doors open.”

Well that… Tony may have the solution to. He can’t exactly call himself an expert yet, but he is in the process of beginning to learn the basics of magic.

“I’m no maid, but, uh, a friend of mine is teaching me magic. Maybe I can help you out once I get the hang of things.”

This earns Tony an incredulous stare.

“You’re learning magic?”
“Uh, yeah. I’m not great at it yet, but I’ll get there. Why is it so surprising?”

Unnur pulls her glossy black hair from its tie, and as she speaks she fixes it back in a bun, catching the hair that had escaped her earlier ponytail.

“No one can practice metallurgy and magic at the same time. Especially not when it could be the difference between life and death for the user. Too much could go wrong. And besides, I’ve never known a man to choose magecraft over something more ‘honorable’, like merchanthood or war arts.” She shrugs. “Magic is a woman’s art, just as smithing is a man’s. I did not expect you to view things any differently, though I should have, seeing as you came to me for an apprenticeship.”

Tony really just picked her because she was the only smith he had any prior knowledge of, but he isn’t going to burst Unnur’s bubble.

“Why is magic only for girls? It’s badass. I would have figured everyone would be clamoring to learn.”

“People think it’s underhanded and sneaky. No man would ‘shame himself’ by relying on trickery rather than pigheaded strength.”

“Okay, but wait, hang on. Why are you doing all this if you think smithing is for men?”

“Hey, I don’t think that. It’s the rest of Asgard that believes that bullshit.”

“Uh huh. So how’d a girl- I’m assuming. Correct me if I’m wrong- get into the trade if it’s ‘for men’?”

Unnur looks sheepish for about half a second before the steel in her spine straightens her posture, a look of defiance hardening her face.

“The father of my father’s father built his own smithy here in Asgard, after nearly three centuries apprenticed to a master of the trade. My great grandfather passed the craft down to his son, who passed it down to my father. It would be unprecedented, yes, but I had hoped that my father would pass the business down to me. I’m the one who spent my childhood watching the smiths under his employ craft these fucking wonders out of nothing. I’m the one who showed any interest in the craft. But because I’m only his daughter, he passed over me in favor of my brother, who last I heard wanted to pursue the life of a poet.”

“Cool story. Still not sure how you ended up here.”

“Hush. Let me finish. I… may have stolen the majority of my dowry for the sake of bribing a lesser smith into teaching me the craft, without the knowledge of my family. I managed to hide this until negotiations began for my betrothal. Needless to say, father was furious.” She sighs, gazing into the dancing coals. Frustration is written in every inch of her figure. Frustration with her lot in life. Frustration with her father’s refusal to see her. Tony can relate, in a way. “I managed to negotiate a deal. I get ten years to make a name for myself. I have one year left. If I succeed, I’m free. If I fail… I’m doomed to marry some wealthy stranger to further my family’s connections. I’d be consigned to the roll of a status symbol.” She shivers, despite the heat. “Can you imagine? I’d be an accessory. I would never see the glow of my forge again, never mold a lump of metal into works of art. I would lose… everything.”

Tony’s stomach flips at being faced with a discouraged Unnur. Oh no. Are those… are those tears in her eyes? Tony can’t handle tears.

“Hey, look on the bright side. You’ve got a minion now, right? Someone successful needs an
apprentice, and here I am. I’m sure everything will fall into place. ‘Sides. Men are all idiots. I
should know. I am one. Now, uh, you said you were going to show me how to ‘draw a spine’?”

Unnur gathers herself together. The tears in her eyes are still, thankfully, unshed, and she nods.

“Yes. Yeah, I did. The coals are looking great. Good job on that, ‘minion’.” She waves Tony over
to her stacks of stock alloys, selecting a chunk. “Valoride steel. .95% carbon, .05% vibranium. This
is good for the spines of small blades if you temper it properly.” She hefts the chink in her hand.
“The best blades are forged of vibranium, or Uru, but vibranium is too expensive for me, and Uru
is so rare that I know only of one piece in existence forged of it.”

One thing leads to another, and Tony ends up spending hours watching a knife the length of his
forearm come to life beneath Unnur’s hands. How anyone can confine her to the life of a trophy
wife is beyond him. She is lean and muscular with years of unrelenting effort, powerful, a glow
radiating from her that isn’t entirely due to the fire. A sort of stalwart serenity fills the air as Unnur
guides the metal into form. She is right where she belongs.

Tony hopes she manages to stay there.

For the time being, though, Tony is a quick study. The next day he files and sharpens the knife,
and within the week he is allowed to begin hammering the scraps of metal out into sheets, while
Unnur works on the complex interlocking scales of a glove. Once he can draw out a sheet of
uniform thickness, he learns how to curve the plates, how to draw wire, how to form an edge. He
works with Unnur on a shield, and on one of the few types of commissions people bring her: pots
and pans.

A month into his apprenticeship, Tony and Loki’s camaraderie has healed and strengthened,
despite Tony’s best efforts. Loki’s mind is quick and clever in a way that delights the inventor,
when it isn’t exasperating him. He and Loki bicker whenever they spend more than ten minutes
together, which becomes more and more often, but rather than irritate him, these moments only
further endear Loki to the other man. He learns that Loki has an unbearable love for snakes, and a
deep lust for knowledge. He learns that magic is the prince’s window for understanding of the
universe, much like science is for Tony. He learns of the exploits of Loki’s younger days, and why
exactly he’s names silvertongue, and wow. You’d think someone would be less cam when relating
how they had been forced to wear a silver prosthetic while waiting for their real tongue to grow
back after having it cut out as punishment for lying.

In return Tony complains about his dad and blabbers on about his various achievement. Dum-E, U,
and Butterfingers. JARVIS. The clean power he had been working on before he let everything go to
shit.

They bond over their shared intellect and shitty fathers. It’s great.

Until Loki decides to go fishing.

The way Loki puts it when he tells Tony over dinner, Thor decided to go fishing, and Loki has to
go along to ‘prevent that oaf from causing yet another interplanetary incident.’ This wouldn’t be
bad, except…

The first Day Loki is gone, Tony misses him. And oh fucking no. Missing him makes Tony more
than a little afraid that he’s starting to care for Loki, just a teensy bit, and everyone Tony lets
himself care about either leaves or dies. Jarvis, Pepper, Rhodey, Yinsen… He’s not willing to do
that again, so Tony squashes all his fondness down, takes tea with Frigga every few days, and
carries on with his apprenticeship.
Like he said. It’s fine. Everything is fine.

Chapter End Notes

So... Here we see some of Unnur's backstory. And Loki and Thor go fishing. That's never nearly ended in tragedy.
Behold, my glorious knowledge of engineering and mechanics (you can tell that’s sarcasm, right?)

The first time Tony brings a damaged boot with him, Unnur is enthralled. As they work together on several sets of cutlery- Tony on the simpler flat parts like butter knives with these little holes along the edge and 2-pronged forks, and Unnur on the spoons and nutcracker looking things and what seem to be twisted swizzle sticks- Unnur peppers him with questions. Tony explains its function, how it connects to a full suit, and so on. When Unnur asks how it came to be damaged, Tony isn’t sure what to say. He settles for the truth.

“I was caught up in a kind of war, which I think we lost, by the way. It just… hasn’t happened yet, as of now. And the place it’s going to happen doesn’t exist yet either.”

Unnur just stares at him through her goggles for a minute.

“That sounds like a heaping load of bullshit,” she announces, dropping another swizzle stick onto its pile, to be tempered later. “It doesn’t make any fucking sense either. If you don’t want to tell me, just say so. Don’t make up these lies about ‘oh it hasn’t happened yet’.” She slides another thin bar of metal- shaped and cut by Tony the day before- into the heat.

Tony gets where she’s coming from. He really does. For whatever reason, Loki and Frigga believed him right off the bat, but he can’t blame Unnur for thinking he’s telling her lies. Tony doesn’t know how to rationally explain spontaneous time travel, and he would have been quick to call bullshit too if someone popped up claiming to be from the world of tomorrow.

“I dunno how it happened, but I kid you not. Certain… acquaintances of mine think I accidentally found a hole in time and space, but that’s about all I got.”

Unnur still seems utterly unconvinced by his lackluster explanation, but oh well. What can you do. The moment passes, and they focus on the boot again.

“What’s it made of?”

“Gold-titanium alloy. A special blend. You, uh… You wouldn’t happen to be able to mix alloys, would you?”

Unnur shrugs. “Not with what I’ve got. Gold and titanium are common enough, but I don’t have the equipment to blend an alloy. I, uh, hmm…” She pauses, lips pursed in thought. “I might be able to trade for some nitinol, though. Not a lot, but maybe enough to patch up some of your armor. You said you’ve got a whole suit, right?”

“Fuck, Unnur. That’d be fantastic. Do you really think you can do that?”

“…Yeah. Yeah I think so. Just, can you bring me any scrap from your armor? I could sell that to help get your nitinol.”
That, Tony can do. He has a small pile of junk metal in the corner of Loki’s room. Given the chance, he would have liked to melt it down and recast the damaged pieces, but trading it for nitinol will have to do for the moment. Tony’s mind races. He can bring the helmet when he comes here tomorrow, have JARVIS project specs of irreparable pieces. Tony can make them with Unnur, smuggle them back into the palace, and use the tools LOKI got him to piece things together. He’ll have to be clever about about finding a safe place to test the armor, but-

“-ony? Tony! For fuck’s sake, get your head out of the clouds! Norns, do you want to set your gloves on fire?”

Unnur shoves him away from the broiling heat of her forge. Tony isn’t anywhere close to being on fire, nor are his gloves, but his teacher is pretty pissed off by his daydreaming, so he decides not to pursue the subject.

“Hey, I’m fine. Just thinking. I used to define myself by my armor. IT was the only thing I ever made with the potential to do good. You can’t blame me for being excited.”

“No, I can’t. But I can and will blame you if I have to spend another day making damned spoons because you’re off daydreaming. Let’s finish this up. Then we’ll talk about your armor.”

Tony doesn’t let Unnur in on all of his trade secrets, but he does hash out the basic mechanisms. She’s already aware of hydraulics, and grasps the functions of the repulsors almost immediately. That, combined with her disdain for electricity as something primitive, drives home Tony’s belief that for all Asgard looks medieval-Europe on the surface, in reality it’s further ahead than Earth, tech-wise. The only reason Unnur’s forge looks so rustic is her lack of patronage and resulting funds.

Back to the point, Unnur is baffled by the wiring in his boot.

“Why do you convert the energy to electricity? More than that, why do you move it with wire? Energy is lost as heat, dumbass. You lose a fuckton of power that way. Embed veins in the metal. Power it that way.”

‘Veins’, upon further pursuit, are enchanted lengths of some kind of synthetic material called bendel. Unnur pulls out a sample, and to Tony is looks like a paper-thin ribbon of glass. That can apparently be tied into knots and is as flexible as fabric. He runs his finger over the slippery-smooth strand.

“I can’t believe you’ve never seen this stuff. It’s everywhere.”

“What’s it made of?”

“Formium.”

“I’m gonna need more than that. Have pity on my ignorant soul.”

Unnur tsks.

“It’s an alchemical element. Alchemists transmute the air into lumps of formium, then smooth it out into ribbons. It’s a kick-ass conductor, and no energy is lost when it passes through.”

“That’s impossible. Alchemy is a crock of shit, and no energy transfer can be perfect.”

“Tony, you’ve got a star in your chest, and I’m a female smith. Nothing is impossible. Besides, you’re asking me to believe in time travel. I’m asking you to believe in alchemy.”
When Tony gets back to the palace that day, he has strands of ‘vein’ stuffed into his boot to play with later. He cuts through the garden again, but as the door closes behind him, a croaking squawk distracts him.

It’s a demonic, high-pitched caw, and it honest-to-god nearly stops Tony’s heart.

“What the…” The leaves beneath a bush rustle faintly, and Tony’s curiosity overcomes him. He glances around to ensure that he’s alone, then crouches down. “Please don’t bite me. Please don’t bite me.”

The leaves rustle again, and as Tony peers beneath the foliage, a pitch-black puffball stumbles out towards him. It’s… a bird. Maybe. A tiny, downy, baby bird, with a little white tuft above one eye. The chick coughs another horrible noise at him, and staggers closer. Beady little eyes gaze up at Tony, and the bird squawks again.

“Well fuck.”

He could just leave it there, but the little thing looks so defenseless. Tony sighs and stashes his boot beneath the bush, then scoops up the chick.

A good half-hour later, after checking nearly every goddamn tree, he finds a nest with two more puffballs. The duo becomes a trio as Tony sets the chick inside the nest. The other two open their beaks, begging for food, but Tony’s work is done. Crisis averted. Bird back in nest. Time to go.

Tony makes a beeline to Loki’s room, boot in hand once more, and after a rinse in the tub, Tony sits down to fiddle with the veins.

The most functional gauntlet is stripped, the wires carefully rearranged to make way. With a bit of improvisation, Tony connects the repulsor to his reactor via one longish vein ribbon. The repulsor glows a steady blue.

“Huh. Would you look at that.”

Tony itches to test out the glove’s firing capabilities, but he’s in someone else’s bedroom, and Dum-E isn’t here to spray foam on any mishaps. Without the space to run tests, Tony has nothing else to do but disconnect the vein, and put the glove back in its spot.

“JARVIS, bring up the suit’s design.”

The helmet’s eyes flash to life, and Tony stands to approach the projected schematics.

“Save a copy as Mark III B. Highlight all electrical wiring, and every component that needs energy.”

He spends hours toying with the hologram, stripping away all wiring and replacing it with the hypothetical ‘veins’. By sunrise the next morning, he has the suit completely refigured. If only he had the materials to build a new one. For the time being, he has to make do with repairing the one he has.

Unnur chides him for the bags under his eyes, but Tony feels a glimmer of excitement.
Chapter Summary

No one can be strong all the time, and anyone can become bitter and angry if no one is ever there for them. Be good to your friends.

Chapter Notes

It's 3 am. I have to get up in five hours to begin a day of interning and working. I'll say this is worth it, though. I'm excited to post this chapter.

Loki is gone for three weeks. Three weeks and four days, if you’re counting. Which Tony isn’t. He’s actually having tea with Frigga, a good two weeks after learning what fucking ‘veins’ are. To be specific, Frigga is drinking a mapley-smelling tea, and Tony sips at a gilded cup of some sort of tart purple drink that kind of tastes like unsweetened blackberries and lemonade.

What Tony really wants is a nice cold pint of beer or three. Or a tumbler of scotch. A bottle of cheap vodka, even. He just wants booze. Wants it so badly his mouth waters at the thought. The only thing preventing him from asking for wine, at least, is the knowledge that this is the longest he’s been anywhere near sober in four years. If he caves and opens the door to indulgence again, he’ll lose himself, and the thought scares him. It took the death of his home to sober up. What would he lose next time?

“Loki returns today,” Frigga says softly, running the tip of one finger around the rim of her little tea bowl.

Tony’s eyes flick up to her, then away again. Play it cool. Play it cool.

“Oh yeah? I, uh, thought he had a week or something left on his trip.”

“He did, but he and Thor have had a falling out. They think it best to return early.”

“When will they be back?”

“A few hours hence. You’ll certainly see Loki by sundown.”

“So tell me about Thor. I’ve seen him, like, three times. I know he’s your other son, but not much else.”

The closest Tony has come to interacting with Thor is passing the guy outside and praying his invisibility charm holds. Thor is only a little shorter than Loki, and built like a lineman, with strawberry hair falling over his shoulders just like Frigga’s. Oh, and he has a beard. There’s that too. Speaking of… He really needs to shave.

“Thor is bold and brash. He often acts without thinking, and he cares much for what those closest to him think., which I believe to be his greatest weakness. One mustn’t go through life heedless of
those around them, but allowing peers rather than morals to dictate one’s actions is just as bad. There is a narrow path that Thor has yet to find, but I have faith in him. He is destined to take the throne of Asgard. My hope is that he will learn to do what he knows is right, rather than what he thinks other believe to be right.”

“If Thor wears the crown, where does that leave Loki?”

“Loki will rule beside Thor, naturally. He would chafe under the crown and come to resent it. As the voice of reason in Thor’s ear, though, he will temper Thor’s emotionalism.

Frigga sounds so certain of this. It’s admirable. Sort of. It’s definitely a display of either faith or sheer stubbornness. From what Tony knows of her, things could go either way.

“But that’s enough about Thor. Tell me of your day. What does Unnur have you working on?”

Tony explains that his mentor’s most common clients are women, typically women without much in the way of money. Unnur says this is because noone else if desperate enough to buy from a female smith. Typically she makes household goods. Candlesticks, hinges, cooking vessels, and so on. More recently, though, the women have also been purchasing daggers as word gets around that Unnur can be trusted. Small things, easily hidden in a bodice or strapped to a leg. The blades are nearly useless for offense, but the women aren’t looking to assault people. They just want to defend themselves. As an unaccompanied women in a place where men think such a woman is ‘up for grabs’, Unnur herself is sympathetic. She herself never travels without a means to defend herself, and she sells the simple, short blades for less than she really should. This business is hardly enough to win her eternal freedom, but Unnur is happy all the same.

Tony’s been alternating between candlesticks, knives, and pieces for his armor.

“Unnur is an admirable woman,” Frigga praises. “Now, how close are you to repairing your suit?”

“At this rate? I’ve got another two months. At least.”

“Well, I can’t wait to see it whole. From what you say this creation is a mighty feat of engineering.”

“You’ll be the first to know when it’s ready.” He sets his now-empty cup on the table and flicks a two-fingered salute. “I’ve gotta go for now. See you later, Frigga.”

He makes to stand, but Frigga reaches out to him.

“Wait, please. May I touch you?” Tony nods warily, and Frigga clasps his hands in hers. “Tony. You have not known my son long, but you are more like him than any other I have known. And you are his only friend. You are not obligated to him, nor would I make you so, but I beg of you: do not abandon him. There are times ahead in which all will turn from him. He will need a friend.

Tony pulls away, a chill slinking up his spine at her beseeching words.

“I’m not responsible for his happiness,” he argues tersely. “I mean, maybe he’s my friend. But he’s definitely not my responsibility.”

“I know. I apologize. I do not intend to pressure you. But please, if he is your friend, treat him as such. If not, let him know. You would be cruel to let him rely on you and your companionship if you do not intend to be present.” Frigga rests a light hand on his shoulder. “No matter which path you choose, I will never think less of you.”
Tony swallows uncomfortably. Frigga has this way of talking about the future that puts him on edge.

“Uh, thank you. I’ll- I’ll see you around.”

As he cleans himself up not much later, and heads to sit out on Loki’s balcony, he thinks about the queen’s words. He’s pretty sure Loki’s pride prevented him from telling Frigga about Tony’s behavior the day the queen stuck their feet to the ground, but he can’t shake the feeling that he was responding to that all the same.

And, well… yeah. That was a pretty shitty move on his part. Loki obviously needed Tony to say something other than ‘bye’. He needed… He needed…

Comfort.

This, Tony realizes now. Loki needed someone to comfort him. Frigga seems to think Tony could be that someone. Really? Him? Former recluse, commitmentaphobe, emotionally constipated Tony?

No way.

But…

It does feel nice to be believed in. Tony fucks up everything he does, but Frigga? Frigga is perfect. If she believes in him, maybe Tony has a shot, just a shot, at being the friend Loki needs.

But no more than that. It’ll hurt too much when he eventually loses Loki too.

He watches the sun sink closer and closer to the horizon, trying to blank out his mind for once. He’s overthinking things bigtime, and he wishes he could stop.

The room’s door opens and closes, and Tony stirs from the corner he’s wedges himself into. His stiff limbs scream in protest, taking their revenge for years upon years of bodily mistreatment, but nonetheless he persists in standing. He pads towards the archway to find Loki ripping off his vambraces and chucking them on the bed, swiftly followed by his intricate leather overcoat thing. His boots are hurtled against the wall, and then Loki stands in the middle of the floor, barefoot and stone-faced. His hands flex, joins popping, and he brings them together, digging one thumb into his palm.

“Princess? You okay?” Tony ventures cautiously, stepping around the billowing curtains and into the room. Loki startles and whirls around to face Tony, and he belatedly realizes the prince hadn’t been aware of his presence. The man tenses up.

“I’m fine,” Loki spits, rubbing at his palm.

“Sure you are. That’s why you’re about to rub a hole in your hand.”

The prince chews over his words carefully, then finally lets them out, voice tight.

“If I stop, my hands will shake, and I do not want that.”

Okay Tony. Time to muscle up and put on his big boy pants. He can do this. He can totally do this.

“Oh, babydoll. I get it. I’m just gonna grab your hands for you, alright? Alright.” Tony reaches carefully over, wrapping his rough hands around Loki’s soft ones in a mirror of what Frigga had
done to him only a few hours prior. He wasn’t kidding about Loki rubbing through his palm. The prince’s hand already looks red and raw from prior abuse. It’s only a matter of time until the skin rips.

Loki doesn’t fight the hold separating his hands. Nor does he fight when Tony sits down on the bed and pulls him down to sit as well. Tony can feel the fine tremors running through the prince, and he finds himself at a loss. What the fuck could have rattled Loki this badly?

They sit in silence for a while, Loki steadily leaning more and more into Tony when it becomes clear the inventor is going to stay put, until Tony is supporting Loki fully and *christ*, what does this guy *eat*? How can such a skinny person weigh so *much*?

“They think me a coward,” Loki states, apropos of nothing. “Thor and his companions.”

Okay, they can start there.


Loki tenses again against Tony, and Tony freezes reflexively as well, fight or flight response choosing now of all times to rear his head. He swallows the sour fear. Stark men are *strong*, and besides. He’d be selfish to let his stupid fucking nerves claim the moment.

“We sailed onto warm seas. Thor wanted to catch a shark, but instead… He hooked a serpent. I am a *coward* for cutting the rope. Thor meant to kill him and mount his head, but he does not deserved to *die*.” Tony clenches his jaw as he feels the wet warmth of tears on his shoulder. Not many, just a pair of salty drops, but he doesn’t know what to *do*. Tony’s heart is banging painfully against the reactor, but Frigga is counting on him, and beyond that, Loki needs someone, and it seems like Tony is the chosen one. He pushes the sickening panic down and focuses on keeping his voice soft and steady.

“That’s not cowardly at all, sweet cheeks. You’re brave enough to ignore what Thor and his pals think and do what you know if right. That takes guts, babe. Guts and a spine.”

Loki humphs, but doesn’t protest. Whether that’s because he’s mollified or because he just doesn’t want to argue for once is up in the air.

“Tony, you should have seen the serpent. He is *glorious*. He could encircle the palace and still bite his tail. Scales like emeralds. Fangs the full length of my arm…”

He speaks with so much *longing*. Tony isn’t sure what to make of it.

“You really like snakes, huh?”

A wry laugh escapes the prince.

“You have no idea. *No* idea.”

Loki’s trembling subsides somewhat. Tony lets go of one hand and awkwardly pats the other’s head. He searches for words for a minute, then settles on something Jarvis used to ask him when he’s had a bad day.

“What’s one good thing that happened? Something fun.”

Loki pauses to think.
“Fandral insists he saw a mermaid. He nearly convinced Volstagg and Thor to jump into the water with him to woo her.”

“What do you think he really saw?”

“I know what he saw. He saw a manatee.”

The prince cackles at the memory.

“Those… don’t look anything like women.”

“I know. He was lusting after a sea cow.”

He descends into helpless, hiccupy laughter, and Tony doesn’t think it’s quite so hysterical, but he can’t help but join in. He’s still freaked out by this touchy-feely shit and is pretty sure he might vomit at any moment, but he feels a glimmer of pride. Good job, self. Crisis averted. From there, Loki steadily relaxes until he’s his witty, acerbic self again. It’s a relief.

Everything goes to shit within twenty four hours, though. The madness starts with ravens. Tony really fucking hates those ravens.
The following day starts out well enough. Tony and Loki eat breakfast together on the balcony. It occurs to Tony, as he calls Loki ‘princess’ for the umpteenth time, that the nickname might seem derogatory given the apparent stigma against all things ‘womanly’.

“You’d let me know if I pissed you off, right?”

Loki looks at him oddly, jam-drenched bread chunk halfway to his mouth. He still has bedhead, and the curly mess is distracting.

“Naturally. Why?”

Tony shrugs toying with his bowl of hot cereal and berries.

“I call you princess. I like the nickname. It fits you. Just don’t want you to think I’m insulting you.”

“Ah. Have no fear, Tony. I am… fond, of your endearments.”


“Mm-hmm. And your nicknames are terms of affection because…?”

“Cause it adds to my charm. Man of mystery. Playboy. Love ‘em and leave ‘em. Idol of men and women and all others as well. All that jazz.” He blusters his way around the question. “Eat your damn breakfast, and get me a razor later. This?” He tugs at his short beard. “It’s gotta go.”

“You… want to rid yourself of your beard?” Loki is so utterly perplexed. It’s adorable, really.

“Yeah. It’s kinda gross. Why’s that so weird? You shave.”

Loki shakes his head.

“I do not grow facial hair.”

“Really? That’s convenient.”

“Perhaps where you are from. Here a beard is a symbol of manhood. For an adult to lack a beard is emasculating.”

“Screw that, princess. I’m the only one who gets to decide whether I’m a man, and so what if you’re ‘not manly enough’? Guy or girl of otherwise, you’d be badass.”

He crams a spoonful of hot cereal into his mouth. Tony is really getting fed up with Asgard’s gender views. He’ll do whatever he damn well pleases. Unnur should do whatever he damn well pleases. Loki definitely should do whatever he damn well pleases. End of story.

“Otherwise?” Loki is bewildered.

“Yeah.” Tony gestures with his spoon. “Not everyone is strictly either or. Some people go
between. Some people aren’t either. At least, that’s how it is where I’m from. I’m all for self-determination.”

And he has the money and status to not be harassed about it. Or, used to have it. His views haven’t always made him popular, but what started out as a stance to piss Howard off became a genuine belief somewhere along the road. It’s probably one of the meager-few points in his favor.

Loki considers this, before filing it away for later. They move on to discussing Tony’s work with Unnur, following about the same vein as his conversation with Frigga, with the exception of Loki very obviously resenting the smith. Why? Tony can’t say. He doesn’t know the reasons, but Loki doesn’t like her.

They part ways shortly before sunrise, and Tony heads straight for Unnur’s forge. He nearly trips over a bottle-brush-tailed cat, which bolts past him as he approaches her door. Tony enters to find her hunched over a table, a rag clutched to her cheek as she rummages around in the folds of her shirt to draw out a small vial on a chain. The smith uncorks it and knocks the pearlescent liquid back and swallows with a grimace.

“Hey, you okay?”

“No,” she hisses, straightening to turn and sit on the table. “Mother fucking cats. I hate those little bastards.”

She drops the rag enough to show Tony a set of uneven lines on her face, narrowly missing her eye. The rag quickly returns to its place to stop the drip of steadily-welling blood, but from Tony can see the skin around the scratches in already red and puffy.

“I’m allergic to fucking cats. One of the little shits got in here and hid under my bed, and I didn’t want the bastard getting it’s fucking hair everywhere so I tried to grab it and put it outside but the motherfucking son of a bitch attacked my face.” Unnur gestures wildly with the rag, and damn, the cat got her good. Blood immediately wells up and dribbles slowly down to her chin. “And it won’t stop bleeding and now my face is swelling and my throat hurts but that could just be because I was shouting at the cat.” She pauses, presses the rag to the long wounds again, and takes a breath to calm herself. “Anyways I need you to walk me to the clinic. I have delayed reactions to bites and scratches and I’m gonna need help soon.”

Well shit. That’s not good.

Tony tries to help her up, but Unnur waves him away.

“I can fucking walk. The only reason I need you is in case it gets too bad before we reach the clinic. Fucking cats.”

The shot of liquid she had been drinking when Tony walked in is apparently the Asgardian equivalent of an epipen, but Unnur as a 50/50 shot of it working. She explains to him that thanks to a genetic quirk on her mother’s side, ‘Vanina’s Elixir’ (that liquid she drank) doesn’t reliably affect her. Hence rushing to a clinic.

Tony listens to Unnur rant as he walks briskly alongside her. She grows steadily more and more out of breath, air starting to wheeze in her chest, but when Tony asks if they can ask anyone to give her a lift, Unnur shoots him down.

“I can- huh- I can make it,” she rasps stubbornly, not leaning on Tony. “Don’t need a boat.”

Tony has no fucking clue how a boat could be helpful, so he shuts up and tries to walk faster.
They stumble through the doors of a brightly-lit clinic, the shining facade out of place among the grunge of surrounding buildings. The clinic is staffed entirely by women, and two of them guide Unnur to the back. Tony, meanwhile, mills around aimlessly, and this draws the attention of one of the attending women—Tony thinks she’s a nurse.

“Excuse me. Are you waiting on your wife?” she asks sweetly. Tony blinks owlishly, and then it clicks.

“What? No! No, she’s not my wife. She’s a friend. Will she be alright?”

The nurse clasps her hands before her, uneasy now that she has been made aware that the man Unnur arrived with at the crack of dawn bears no relation to her. She doesn’t comment, though. Only answers his question.

“Yes. Your, ehm, friend should be just fine. Would you like to take a seat? She’ll come out when the doctors release her.”

Tony and Unnur reunite about a half-hour later. The swelling is gone from Unnur’s face, and the worst of the claw-marks is held together with little silvery butterfly bandages.

“I’ve gotta put this on three times a day,” she complains, brandishing a jar of ointment. “Can you imagine how nasty that’s gonna get with the soot?”

“Sounds like fun. You had me worried there for a while. Allergic reactions aren’t treated so fast where I’m from.”

He himself is allergic to one thing, as far as he knows. Eel, which he had tried exactly once as a teenager. Afterwards he then proceeded to swell up like a balloon, and spent two whole days in a hospital for monitoring, even after being given epinephrine. And here Unnur was, in and out in half an hour.

“Even the free clinics function as they should. Come. I’m starving, and I think I’m coming down from the adrenaline rush. I need something to settle my stomach.”

Tony knows this is a bad idea, walking around in broad daylight without the amulet hanging around his neck— it sits instead within a pocket, right next to the distress signal Loki crafted— but he wants to eat street food with Unnur. Is that too much to ask?

Yes, apparently.

Unnur buys them each a day-old, sweet, sticky baked thing studded with raisins and walnut chunks, and they wander slowly back to Unnur’s forge. She is on orders to rest for the remainder of the day, but Tony can plainly see that even one day of inactivity is going to drive her nuts. But, well... While he himself has a shit record of following doctors’ orders, he damn well intends to see Unnur obey them. A lump of ice still sits in his gut, spreading and chilling him bit by bit now that he’s had time to process that Unnur could have died.

Maybe that’s a little strong. She seemed to have things well in hand, and whatever miracle cure the Asgardians have for anaphylaxis appears to have done the trick. But tell that to his hindbrain. Tony isn’t used to the people he likes actually surviving potentially-deadly scenarios. So really, he can’t be blamed for the way his eyes keep sliding over Unnur, reminding himself again and again that she’s fine. Unnur doesn’t take long to catch him.

“Why’re you looking at me funny?” she asks, stuffing another bite of pastry in her mouth.
“What can I say? You’re hotter than the sun,” he simpers, sending her a winning smile. Unnur immediately chokes, which sends a spike of terror through Tony, but she manages to swallow, and the choking turns into laughter.

“Oh Norns, Tony,” she snickers. “You’re such an ass. Just so you know, if you ever tell me that in earnest, you’re gonna end up with a bloody nose. Clear?”

“Crystal.”

Her lips quirk up in a lazy grin, and she accepts his agreement. Tony likes the sight of her smile.

“Good. You’re my friend. I don’t want that to fuck itself up. Besides-” She lowers her voice as if imparting a deep secret. “I’m not really... interested. In men. In general, you know.”

“Ah. Well, just let me know if you ever need a wingman. I’ll bore some girl to tears, and you can sweep in to rescue her.”

A delighted light illuminates Unnur’s eyes. He wonders what she would have done if he had reacted harshly to her admission. Tony decides he never wants to find out.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Her tone makes it clear that she’s never going to take him up on his offer. “It’s not like I’m gonna find a woman like me. Marriage is between a man and woman, here. The only ones who can get away with same-sex love are the nobles who take a side lover. After marriage.”

Tony doesn’t know enough about the ways of Asgard to give anything but empty encouragement. He wishes he still had access to his company. He can absolutely see Unnur working R&D, with a home forge in her backyard. And she could hit up the clubs of New York, and do whatever else it is that people looking for serious relationships do. As things stand, he has no way to help. He’s saved from putting his foot in his mouth, oddly enough, by a bird.

Although ‘saved’ is probably too kind a word.

He feels the air stir behind him mere milliseconds before scaly talons bury in his hair. Wings buffet the sides of his face as the bird snaps at his hair, yanking out a tuft. The bird takes off again in a flurry of black feathers.

“Christ! What the fuck is that?” Tony hisses, rubbing at his head. His heart is pounding in fright at the unexpected assault.

“Huginn, I think. Or Muninn. They’re the Allfather’s ravens.” The birds alight on a lamppost. The one not clutching brown hair in its beak heaves a warbling croak his way, and a chill runs down Tony’s spine. Fuck. “I don’t know why they’re acting like this, though. Usually they just fly around for an hour and go back to the king.”

Tony takes Unnur by the arm and guides her towards the palace. He holds the sticky bun between his teeth and wraps his fingers around the little distress charm. It hums to life in his pocket, and Tony takes the bun back in his hand.

“So I’m apparently easily confused with something called a Midgardian, so, uh, I might be in danger of being arrested.” If they can just get to the palace, Frigga and Loki might be able to protect him. The issue is, the palace is also where most of the guards are concentrated.

“What?” Unnur shakes off his hand, but keeps pace with him nonetheless. “You’re a Midgardian?”
“No, I’m an Earthling. It’s different, I promise.”

“Where are Earthlings from then?”

“I told you. My place doesn’t exist yet. Fuck.”

Tony’s almost at the gate, before he realizes he’s going to have to put the invisibility amulet on again. Which leaves Unnur alone, out in the open. This draws him up short.

“What? What’s wrong now?”

Unnur looks pretty winded, which Tony understands given what she endured that morning. He feels a little dickish for what he says next, but really, he can’t think of anything else.

“Uh, you’re going to have to go. I’ll just be slowed down if you’re trailing me. So, uh... Bye.”

He drops the amulet around his neck and vanishes. Unnur can’t see him now, and he abandons her there. If Unnur is found helping an alleged Midgardian, she’s going to be in deep shit. That’s not a thing Tony is willing to put her through.

“You’re such a dick! You better be at work tomorrow!” Tony hears her snap behind him, but there’s concern in her tone. He doesn’t stop to respond.

Once in the palace, Tony bolts up curved stairs, trying to reach the perceived safety of Loki’s room. He manages to avoid two groups of patrolling guards, but everything comes crashing down around his ears as he rounds a corner.

Tony comes nose to nose with a stocky, bearded man. In place of one eye is a glinting golden patch, but the present eye focuses on Tony immediately.

Fuck fuck fucking fuck! He turns on his heel and sprints away.

“He’s cloaked,” a gravely voice barks as he retreats. The same warbling croak from the streets outside echoes in double.

It all happens so quickly. Black talons pull the amulet from around his neck, and the hiss of weapons being drawn assaults Tony’s ears. Fucking son of a bitch! Where are you, Loki?"

Tony is swiftly surrounded, and his heart slams against the reactor so hard he thinks it might stop. With no other option available that doesn’t involve suicide, he...

Surrenders.

Fixing a cocky grin on his face, he raises his hands in all the bravado he can muster.

Chapter End Notes

Hit that comments button! Tell me what you liked about the chapter! Tell me what you think of my story!
Fifteen

Chapter Summary

Here’s the late chapter!

Chapter Notes

So my brain scan came back normal! It was a tension headache, not a tumor. Isn't that great?

I deleted the chapter with the picture of Jormungandr because it's been moved to it's own work, also in the SSBS series. I also deleted the chapter explaining my lack of update, because it really bothers me to have the chapter numbers not align.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony is taken down countless flights of stairs, all with his wrist caught up in these massive cuffs. Seriously, they whirred when some gilded guard clicked them shut.

“Y’know, I think this might be overkill,” he chats, snapping the connecting cable taut. “You ever heard of a zip-tie?”

These guys are as stone-faced as the Queen’s Guard. They simply propel him along, utterly immune to his inane chatter, which is a damn shame. Tony thinks he’s a wonderful conversationalist.

“And what’s with that armor? Doesn’t that nose-guard screw with your vision? And the hell is up with those horns? If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were compensating for something. Oh wait- I don’t know any better. But don’t worry; I won’t tell.”

The stairs bottom out somewhere deep beneath the palace, at the end of a long, tall hall honeycombed with rectangular-ish rooms, for lack of a better word. Tony assumes this to be a prison, judging by the number of guards and the fact that all the non-guards are safely ensconced behind glowing golden chicken wire.

“Okay, now this is definitely overkill,” he gripes as a heavy collar locks into place. A chain now connects the cuffs to the collar. Tony’s hands can’t go below his hips, and he just barely refrains from making some off-color joke.

They search him, stripping him of the charms Loki and Frigga gave him, and the little knife Unnur made him. Once and only once does he he struggle, when someone’s hand wraps around the arc reactor to take that too.

“Don’t. Don’t,” he hissed, smacking his own hands over the glowing blue circle. “That’s keeping me alive. Take that and I die.”
It probably isn’t too smart to give that little tidbit of information away, but there’s a roaring in his ears and the phantom pain of slipshod surgery bolting through his chest, and he can’t exactly be blamed for panicking.

The guards leave his reactor alone, though, so at least that’s something. He even gets a honeycomb cell all to himself. Isn’t he lucky. The gold sparkly chicken wire flickers to life behind him, leaving Tony alone in his plain white box. The cuffs and collar are still firmly in place, so Tony thinks it’s safe to assume he’s going to be moved soon. Hopefully to a trial rather than simply to another cell to rot for his final, what, twenty years, if he’s being generous? If that. Tony hasn’t been kind to his body. But still. Those are twenty years he wants to spend outside prison.

It takes Loki a grand total of ten minutes to find him. The distress signal is probably still pinging, if it hasn’t been shut off or shielded by now; the real feat is that Loki managed to find him amongst countless identical cells.

“Surprise…” Tony greets, lifting his cuffed hands to wave.

Loki frowns at him, but his magnificent green eyes rove over Tony as though checking him for injury.

“What part of ‘avoid Odin at all costs’ did you not understand?” the prince finally grumbles, hands clasped stiffly behind his back.

“Hey, I didn’t go looking for Old King Cole. His blackbirds found me. The resulting fallout was totally not my fault.”

Loki scrubs a hand across his face.

“Why, pray-tell, were you spotted by the ravens in the first place? IT was my understanding that you reach your precious Unnur’s forge before dawn. Huginn and Muninn take flight at sunrise. You should have been safe.”

“First-off, no one told me about the dawn patrol. That was not a think I knew. Secondly, I don’t know why, but I do know you don’t like Unnur. However, she had an allergic reaction and needed help getting to a clinic.”

“She could have gone on her own,” Loki sniffs.

“Wow, you cold bastard. Excuse me for not abandoning a friend.”

If Tony could he would cross his arms. As things stand he just harrumphs and kicks his foot against the floor.

“Where are you from?” Loki demands, totally out of the blue.


“Yes, but you look like a Midgardian. And no Midgardian may see Asgard and like.”

Oh. Right. That’s an issue. He twists the cuffs around.

“I’m from New York, but it doesn’t exist yet. To my knowledge I’ve never lived anywhere called Midgard.”

“Better. When you are brought before Odin for judgment, speak nothing but the truth. Very few
can convince him of a lie, and I think it unwise to risk your life on this.”

“What if he decides I’m lying anyways?”

“Demand a federversuch before witnesses. A feather will be plucked from each of Odin’s ravens and burned. You will inhale the smoke, and no lie will be able to pass from your lips. You will simply need to choose how much of the truth to let slip.”

“Okay. Federversuch. Got it.”

“Specify that you wish it to be before witnesses. If Odin is the only one to bear witness, he can choose to condemn you even with the test. He is not as… honorable, as he would have his populace believe.”

“Be honest with me, Lo. What are my chances?”

Loki takes a moment to mull over his words.

“Tony, from what little I know of you, chance holds no sway over your fate.”

Loki makes himself scarce when the guards come many hours later. Tony tried to cut Loki free earlier, but the prince was adamant about remaining. Tony’s actually pretty grateful for the company. The barren cell offers little in terms of pastimes. They fall out of conversation around hour two, but while Tony paces the length of his cell, Loki lounged on the floor just outside, casting an illusion to hide himself from the guards.

When Loki makes his escape, Tony knows he’s going to face the music soon. True enough, the sparkly chicken wire fades away, and Tony is marches out between two armored men. Up stairs, down halls, and finally into yet another massive room with squiggles on the floor and gold curtains covering open floor-to-ceiling windows, or maybe open archways? Whatever. They’re big and such an eyesore in that overused color. At the end of the long, tall room is a throne upon a fuckton of gold stairs. The throne itself mimics the horn-things on the guards’ helmets. Once raven perches upon each horn, and on the throne itself sits a grizzled old man sporting a golden eyepatch: the very same old man who saw right through Tony’s invisibility charm.

Odin.

Tony is brought to kneel before Odin, but he rolls his eyes and rocks up to his feet.

“You will show respect,” hisses generic guard number one.

Odin waves a hand dismissively.

“He may stand.” The king fixes Tony with his one-eyed gaze. “Name yourself.”

“Tony Stark.”

“Now, Tony Stark. From whence do you hail? How did you come to be here?”

Don’t lie. Federsuch.

“I’m from New York, New York, your majesty.”

“Well that sounds like utter nonsense,” a new voice purrs, as sharp and welcoming as a dew-
jeweled spider’s web.

Tony blinks, frowning, as someone new joins the scene. She rubs him the wrong way immediately.

She slinks out from behind the throne, metallic bronze skin shimmering in the light. A rippling blue dress drips down, slicking against her ample curves to pool around her ankles. Her eyes glint crystal violet. She runs her fingers through snow white hair, and as the ruler-straight locks shift Tony catches a glimpse of geometric patterns shaved into the sides of her head.

The newcomer traces her fingers across the golden surface of the throne as she rounds it to perch delicately atop one flat armrest. Tony eyes her in suspicion as she crosses one leg over the other.

“How can one come from a place that has yet to exist? We can clearly see that little Tony here is a Midgardian. He’s lying, darling.”

Darling? Tony cocks an eyebrow. Uh… He thought Frigga would be the one calling Odin ‘Darling’.

Odin braces a hand against the side of his face, a thoughtful gleam in his eye. Behind Tony, the door opens, and the soft click of well-made shoes echoes down the hall.

“Allmother,” the newcomer greets dismissively as Frigga comes to stand beside Tony.

The queen dismisses the guards so that she alone stands with the inventor. Her hands fold in front of her, and she stands with her head high, eyes fixed on Odin alone.

“Frigga.” Odin turns a dispassionate eye on his wife. “Do you know this intruder?” His voice is heavy with mistrust and suspicion, but Frigga is unwavering.

“Yes. He came to me for help not long ago. Tony has been removed from his time. I have been seeking a way to return him.”

“How long have you known of his presence?” demands the metallic-bronze woman reclining on the throne’s armrest. Frigga stalwartly ignores her, which prompts a huff and a snide “How petty.”

“Peace, Mercel.” Odin smooths a hand over the woman’s bare arm. “Frigga, how long has he been within the bounds of Asgard?”

Normally Tony would be more than a little offended to be talked about like he isn’t even there, but right now letting Frigga take the wheel seems like the best route to his survival.

“Just under two months.”

“Really? You’ve been deceiving your husband for two months?” Mercel gasps, eyes glittering mercilessly.

“Given how easily Tony is mistaken for a Midgardian, I thought it safest to conceal him until I could send him home.”

“To Earth,” Tony pipes. “No One I know has ever called it Midgard.”

“I see,” growls Odin. Tony gets the feeling that old one-eye has already made up his mind on Tony’s guilt. “And who else knows of his presence.”

“No one.” Frigga is firm in her lie. Tony doesn’t know what she has to gain with the lie, but he isn’t about to be an ass and contradict her.
The questions get more pointed and forceful from there. Frigga intervenes when she can until Odin snaps at her to ‘Be quiet woman!’ Goaded by the living sculpture beside him, Odin grows less and less congenial until finally he takes hold of the golden spear braced on the throne and slams the butt of it against the floor. Sparks fly.

“Enough! You bear the aura of Midgard. Your slippery tongue cannot cure you of this. No Midgardian may set foot within Asgard and life. You are no different.”

“Wait! Hold on a second. I can prove I’m not Midgardian,” Tony yelps. “Federtest, right? Or, uh, federversuch. That thing with the feathers. I can’t lie with that, right?”

Odin regards him silently, and Mercel leans over to whisper in his ear. Tony can’t hear what she’s saying, but out of the corner of his eye Tony sees Frigga stiffen as one of Mercel’s hands smooths possessively across Odin’s chest. You know that really uncomfortable feeling you get when you see two random strangers trying to eat each other’s faces in public? Yeah. Tony’s feeling that bigtime, as he shifts from foot to food and looks up at the ravens to avoid watching Mercel grope the fucking king and kiss his ear as she speaks. It’s weird.

When Mercel finally leans back away, her painted lips curve upwards in satisfaction. She looks for all the world like the cat who got the cream.

“Howinn and Muninn’s feathers are far to precious to waste on one such as you.”

“Odin, this is the only way to prove his innocence,” Frigga insists, her voice far more level than Tony imagines his would have been if he were in her position. She holds out an arm and whistles sharply. The ravens take flight. One latches onto her offered arm, and the other alights on her shoulder. Odin’s eye narrows, his face darkening.

It takes another eternity of heated debate, mostly on Frigga’s part, but eventually a bowl is brought forwards. Frigga gently soothes the birds and searches through their plumage for loose feathers. They each lose one from their wings, and the feathers find their way into a bowl. Heeding Loki’s advice, Tony insists on witnesses, much to Odin’s displeasure. The inventor defers to Frigga’s judgment on who is to bear witness.

In the end, Frigga summons Thor, some chick named Freya, another one named Eir, yet another woman called Saga, and finally, Loki. Tony feels Loki’s eyes in particular as he leans over the smoking bowl and breathes deep.

An electric sizzle tingles out through Tony’s body. He feels like a livewire, like he’s licked a battery.

“Once again,” Odin rumbles. “From whence do you hail?”

Chapter End Notes

As always, Comments are my lifeblood!
Sixteen

Chapter Notes

I’ll be honest. Some of your comments on the last chapter made me want to steeple my fingers together and laugh maniacally while spinning around in a high-backed chair with a cat in my lap. I have this thing planned out until the very end. The outline for this first story alone is twelve pages, front and back. And I have two more stories planned out as well. Mercel will have her time in the sun. All will be revealed. Just… be a little patient.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Loki had said the feather thing would be like a mythical truth serum. He never mentioned it would give him drug-o-vision. Tony can’t say his hands are the cleanest. Hanging out with people who can easily afford less-than-legal entertainment meant effortless access to anything he might have wanted to try. Tony’s just obscenely lucky nothing ever hooked him more strongly than liquor.

This isn’t quite like anything he’s ever tried. It’s like someone took the room he is currently in and shook all the colors from their lines. The black of Hoo and Moo’s plumage seems up Frigga’s arms like ink across wet paper. Gold drips from the ceiling to float in glimmering clouds around him, and Tony spins slowly, taking it all in. Loki stands out as a flash of fertile green, situated right beside a smear of bloody red. Frigga touches his arm, and the simple contract echoes like a drip in a cavern. He feels all hummy.

“Tony?”

Her voice feels like a winter rabbit’s fur, all soft ant warm.

“Hmm?”

“Answer Odin. Where are you from?”

“That’s easy. New York, New York. USA, North America, Intersection of the north and west hemispheres of Earth. 40.7128 degrees north and 74.0059 degrees west.”

Despite herself, Frigga seems to be smiling at him, if that curve of bony white on her face is anything to go by. Tony grins back at her, but the sandpaper sound of Odin clearing his throat draws him away.

“Were you born on Midgard?” he demands. Hmm. Odin is not shaped like a friend.

“No-puh.” He pops the p and watches it drift away like an iridescent bubble. “First time I ever heard of Midgard was here. Why is it ‘Midgard’ anyways? What’s it in the middle of? What’s it guarding?”

Odin keeps asking questions, and Tony keeps giving answers, but he gets the feeling that they’re talking in circles again. It probably doesn’t help that he keeps getting distracted by Odin’s beard, which is starting to look like a ragged sheep glued to his face.
“Are you satisfied now, Odin?” Frigga inquires, putting her foot down. Tony hasn’t said anything incriminating, as far as he can recall, so he hopefully holds out his cuffs.

The bondage gear is taken away from him with a series of whirs and clicks, and Frigga turns her back on Odin to guide Tony away. She keeps her head high, and Tony does his best not to stumble over the writhing squiggles that have come to life on the floor. Finally, though, the doors close behind them with a fluttering boom.

“Are you alright?” the queen asks him the moment they’re alone. Her soft hand presses to his forehead, and he leans into the touch. “You are not yourself.”

“M’fine,” he insists, but Frigga clucks at him in disbelief, and maybe she has a point. The sound looks like a flock of butterflies, and Tony’s eyes follow it intently.

“You are not. Come. I think you ought to lay down.”

Loki melts from the shadows to fall into step beside Frigga.

“What is wrong with him?” the prince murmurs. Tony’s heart bangs against his reactor as it leaps in elation.

“Loki!” he hums, pivoting on one foot to face the prince. This unbalances Tony, but Lok’s cool hands snap out to steady him.

“Norns, your eyes are enormous,” Loki chuckles. “Have you been drugged?”

Tony reaches up to pat his own face, seeking to judge for himself whether his eyes have actually grown in size. Loki laughs again with his witch’s cackle. Tony likes how that one looks, like popping fire zipping around his head.

“Not your actual eyes. Your pupils.”

Ah. That does make more sense.

“I believe the magic of Huginn and Muninn’s feathers is interacting with that of his reactor,” Frigga explains, urging them along.

“It’s not magic. It’s science,” he insists, leaning into Loki as they walk. Their colors blur and blend together, forming a kind of dark ocean where the blue of Tony’s shirt mashes with the green on Loki’s cloak.

“Science and magic are one and the same,” Loki reminds him.

“No way. Science is real. Magic is bullshit.”

“Is it now.” Loki lifts a hand, sparkles flying between his fingers. Tony is enthralled. He reaches out to snatch at the sparkles, but he misses and catches Loki’s hand instead.

“Total bullshit. I need more convincing than glitter-fingers.”

“Tony, you practice magic. You boiled water with your breath just yesterday.” A smile curls through Loki’s voice.

“I practice bullshit. Bullshit that works, but until someone can say how it works, it’s still bullshit.”

Frigga lets them squabble, though the inventor has the sneaking suspicion that Loki’s just trying to
Frigga stops before an unfamiliar smear of a door several floors up, and pushes it open. The room beyond is maybe a bedroom. If the colors would just stay where they’re supposed to go rather than running amok like a van Gogh painting, it would be easier to tell.

“You are not an official guest of mine, Tony. You may stay in a room of your own and walk freely through Asgard.”

She hands him a gilded key, and Tony squints down at it.

“But I like Loki’s room.”

“Unfortunately, now that people are aware of your presence, residing in Loki’s room would be frowned upon, to put it lightly. Now, Loki, would you be a dear and wait with Tony until he recovers from this? I have arrangements to make for his stay.”

“Of course, Mother.”

The door closes with a navy blue click, and Loki scoops the inventor up in his arms. Tony’s limbs dangle awkwardly, and he squawks in protest until the prince dumps him unceremoniously into the bed.

“Take off your shoes,” he commands imperiously.

“Forward, aren’t you? Anything else you want off me?”

Tony gives Loki his sleaziest smirk, but Loki simply rolls his eyes and kicks off his own shoes. The inventor, meanwhile, battles with the slithering laces of his boots, but they find their way to the floor in the end. He flops back on the plush bed and stares upwards, watching the kaleidoscope-dancing on the ceiling.

“Why is it doing that?” he mumbles, reaching up as if to touch it.

“Doing what?”

“Dancing around.”

Loki follows his gaze and snickers again. The colors dance and pulse at the sound.

“Because you are very, very high. Budge up.”

Tony scoots to the side and lets Loki lay down beside him. The flickering ceiling pales in comparison to the curly-haired flash of green beside him.

“Why are you staring? Am I dancing too?”

“Nah, you’re just awesome. Why are you so badass?”

A look of utter, unguarded surprise greets Tony, but Loki swiftly covers it up.

“I’m not, really. My ass is quite wonderful. Perhaps you simply have questionable taste.”

Tony grins at his- well, he thinks he can call Loki his friend. He hopes so.

“Ha ha, very funny. I know you know what I mean.”
Loki folds his hands on his chest and turns his head towards Tony. The other’s thin lips are upturned, but there’s something melancholy there.

“What’s wrong, princess?”

“Nothing at all.” He rolls his eyes again, huffing a laugh. “Thor is desperate to meet you. I hope you don’t mind that you’ll be treated as a curiosity until the gossip mills churn some new drivel out.

“Babe, that’s the story of my life. I can handle the spotlight. I’ve got- I’ve got… panache.”

Loki snorts. “You ridiculous man,” he murmurs fondly.

“You’re ridiculous. You’re all sad.”

“I am not.”

Loki plays a little dirty, summoning iridescent ice and fire to dance above them, condensing and dispersing into shapes and figures- some of which Tony can name and some of which he can’t. The dichotic mass absorbs his attentions, and it slowly consolidates into a story, narrated by Loki himself.

It’s pretty standard fairytale content. A pair of orphaned children get lost in the woods, and as poor luck would have it, they come across a struggling yo-tun ensnared in a trap. The yo-tun begs and pleads for the kids’ help, but when they set it free out of the kindness of their hearts, the yo-tun turns around and tries to murder them for dinner. They’re saved by a gallant hero who kills the yo-tun and whisks the kids away to adopt them. The end.

“What’s a yo-tun?”

“A jotun is a monster, a giant beast that lives upon a world of barren ice.”

“Convenient fairytale villain, huh?”

“Yes, but the stories, unfortunately, are rooted in truth. We were at peace with them once, long ago, but Father thwarted their invasion of Midgard seven centuries ago, and those savages have harbored nothing but hatred towards us ever since. They pose one of the greatest risks to Asgardian safety that I know of.”

Tony ponders this, mind immediately sliding to the only alien invasion he’s had experience with. Could those be jotuns?

“D’you think they’re the things that are going to attack Earth?”

“It is entirely possible.”

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Tony slowly comes down from his unexpected high, the fascinating synesthesia replaced by a godawful headache. It’s shaping up to be one hell of a migraine. The inventor squirms to bury his head and shoulders beneath feather pillows.

“I’m dying,” he moans, rubbing his aching eyes in the blessed darkness beneath his pillows.”

“No you’re not.”
A pointed finger prods at his ribs. When Tony doesn’t respond, two more swift jabs follow. He grumbles and swats blindly at the pain-in-the-ass harassing him, but Loki latches onto his wrist and drags Tony out from his pillow-tomb.

“You son of a bitch,” Tony whispers, betrayed.

“Come now, we both know you don’t think that of Mother. The moon is high, and you have not eaten since this morning. A dying man needs his sustenance just the same as a living one. At the very least you must drink something.”

“Princess, if I eat anything right now I’m gonna throw up on you. Specifically you. I blame you.”

Tony doesn’t need his eyes open to know exactly what expression Loki bears. Distaste and mild disapproval. Sure enough-

“Please don’t.”

A crooked grin tugs weakly at Tony’s mouth, but he wasn’t kidding about the vomiting. Between the radiating pain hammering his head and the roiling in his stomach, he might retch regardless of food. Loki bullies Tony into standing up anyways, motivating him with such seductive promises as a ‘Farrower’s draught’. Which, as Loki explains, is a migraine-killer.

It has to be fresh-brewed, which means Tony has to sit and wait in the infirmary. This also means he has time to be cornered by that Eir person from the throne room. She apparently runs the palace infirmary, and despite the fact that she has to be curious about his display in the throne room, she doesn’t demand anything but for Tony to stand between two silver hoops. Loki is unruffled, so Tony tries to bear it in good humor, but he has an echoing pain in his head, and he thinks he might pass out.

“The queen has requested I ensure you to be in good health,” Eir explains, watching intently as a mass of tiny golden sparkles condenses into the shape of a man before her. “Yet I doubt a man in good health carries metal in his chest.”

“Yeah, long story, not telling it. I’ve got metal in my chest, this keeps it stationary.” He taps the reactor. “Otherwise I’m fine. Are we done?”

Eir fixes him with a stern gaze, as one of her nurses brings a porcelain mug of something smelling of basil and thyme. Tony accepts the mug, and takes a tentative sip. He’s aware of Loki standing guard somewhere behind him, but Tony can stare down a doctor if need be.

She runs her fingers through the golden sparkle-image of a man, and a mass of silver slivers remains in her palm. She approaches Tony, her simple, utilitarian dress rippling around her ankles.

“Twenty seven shards,” she says softly, offering the handful of silver out for Tony’s examination. “You distrust healers- this is plain. But I would not be who I am, if I were to accept a person’s suffering as given, and ignore it.”

The inventor grips the mug more tightly, distinctly uncomfortable. He doesn’t know this person. He doesn’t want her attention.

“I will not give you false hope, but wherever you are from, I think my infirmary is better equipped than anything you have encountered. Perhaps, someday, you will not need to worry about this anymore.” She clenches her fist, and the silver sparkles vanish. Her eyes are flat and blue as ice, but while she’s definitely making Tony feel uncomfortable, he doesn’t think she’s malicious. Just… Really, really weird. “Drink your draught and rest. Come see me tomorrow. I will map the
metal around your heart and see what can be done.”

Chapter End Notes

Would anyone be interested in a mini-series of Asgardian Fairy Tales?

Also, don't do drugs. If you are doing drugs, make sure they won't consume your life. My cousin is in rehab for heroin addiction, and it's torn his family apart. I'm not personally opposed to recreational drugs, but don't take unnecessary risks, and stay the hell away from heroin.

Comments are dearly beloved! I treasure every one :)}
College is coming! I start back on Monday, with my schedule featuring such horrors as organic chemistry. Yikes! I’m going to try and slow my updates to every other Thursday, but we’ll see if I can manage it. If I vanish or miss some updates, just assume o-chem is kicking my ass.

He makes it back to his room after giving Eir a slew of empty promises to return for a physical. No offense to her, but Tony doesn’t like doctors. He doesn’t like being poked and prodded, and there are very few people he willingly tolerates touch from. Right now, that number is three. So yeah, he’s not going to keep his appointment. Instead, Tony bids Loki goodnight at the door, and Loki summons the suit head to him. The helmet is a comforting weight in Tony’s hands. He has been meaning to devise a way to make JARVIS more portable, but he hasn’t had the materials or equipment to do so. Maybe there’s a way to get both now that Tony’s presence has been made known. Questions questions.

JARVIS is unsurprisingly unhappy with Tony’s escapades for the day, but Tony knows his digital progeny can’t fault him for helping a friend.

Tony drops off to sleep within moments of hitting the sheets, although his rest is by no means restful. The sheets are a tangled mess when Tony gets up again, panting and sweating. Stabs of pain zig through his chest as his heart hammers itself against the unforgiving reactor. Letting Eir take a look into his chest seems much more fucking appealing now than it did last night, but the thought of having a stranger’s hands anywhere near the gaping hole above his fucking heart makes his skin crawl.

He doesn’t realize he’s hyperventilating until JARVIS flickers on and says, “Sir, please breathe in time with the light.” A slow, steady light pulses, brightening for two seconds, holding for two seconds, and dimming over four seconds to start the cycle again. Coaxed by JARVIS, Tony follows the rhythm as his vision starts to swim. In, hold, out. In, hold, out. Breathe. Just… breathe.

Tony isn’t a stranger to nightmares, nor is he unfamiliar with the effects they can have on his waking hours. It’s just as rough every time, though. He never gets used to the nightmares. They’re a weird blend of memory and agonizing imagination, and Tony longs for a stiff drink. A tall, stiff drink. He still feels Pep’s blood on his hands, but when he looks down they’re clean. The inventor flexes his fingers, and an impulse grips him out of the blue. He changes into real clothes, says goodbye to JARVIS, and rides the impulse out into the hall.

The sky is still dark, but Tony knocks on Loki’s door anyways. He looks down at his hands again, imagining in the shadows that he can see what he knows is not there. Is Loki still asleep? Maybe. But Tony is scared that he’ll do something he’ll regret if he’s left alone. Normally he would just ride it out alone, but now he’s here, and he’s already knocked. Maybe he could bolt? Or maybe Loki’s a deep sleeper.

He isn’t, actually. Tony knows this, having woken the prince up more than once with his fitful turning. In fact, Loki answers the door not much later. He looks sleepy and disheveled, his hair a
wild bird’s nest, but there’s that patented expression of haughty superiority still in place. It melts away when Loki registers Tony’s presence.

“Tony? What are you doing here? It’s so very early.”

“I found myself awake and thought you’d like company, princess. That big ‘ol bed of yours must get lonely.”

Tony’s voice sounds strange to his own ears, but he thinks he hides it well with the cheap, tasteless come-on. Loki cocks a skeptical eyebrow, but he lets Tony in anyways.

Loki scrubs a hand across his eyes as Tony slips past him, mouth stretching in a yawn, and he shuts the door. Tony gravitates instantly towards the pile of his armor that’s still lumped in the corner. He fiddles with the back plates to steady his hands, but a bastardization of his suit took Pepper from him. He turns away.

Behind him Loki has summoned a table, and what smells like coffee sits steaming in an open carafe. By far, Tony’s favorite trick Loki and Frigga know is conjuring food from elsewhere in the palace. And now there’s coffee? Why hasn’t Tony been made aware of this fact?

Loki sits down and pours himself a mug of the coffee-stuff, and Tony sits down with him.

“I believe it is now my turn to ask what is wrong,” Loki observes, stirring a fair amount of sugar into his coffee. “I doubt you came here just to warm my bed.”

Tony takes the carafe and pours a mug for himself, putting off his answer. The coffee isn’t actually coffee. It’s similar, but there’s a creamy nuttiness to it that Tony can’t place. He burns his mouth taking an over-large gulp, and holds the mug tightly between his hands.

“I’ll level with you. I needed company. Some days are bad days, and today is one such day.” Every word comes as easily as pulling teeth. Tony shrugs, brushing it off in an attempt as casualness. “It’s not exactly unusual. Tell me to fuck off, and I’ll let you go back to sleep.”

“Nonsense, you silly man. My door is always open to you, night or day.”

Tony hovers around Loki’s room until the sky just barely starts to pink. He still feels jumpy, his chest simultaneously so full and empty that he could both burst and implode, but there’s less of a need to do something, anything, to take the edge off. He still makes a huge fucking mistake based on, ding ding ding, another impulse.

Sex has never held the same innate interest for Tony that it seems to for just about everyone else. It feels fucking amazing, and Tony isn’t exactly shy about it, but he doesn’t crave it in and of itself. He just… it takes the edge off. It makes his mind go blessedly quiet.

Maybe that association is why Tony rounds the table to kiss Loki.

The prince’s lips are cool and just a bit chapped, and Tony slides his fingers into the prince’s curly hair. Loki doesn’t do anything to resist him, but it takes him a moment to realize Loki isn’t responding either.

Tony jerks away as though scalded, heart racing as revulsion squirms in his gut. Loki watches Tony with wary curiosity, but Tony can’t meet his eyes. Immediate regret courses through him. Fucking impulse control. God damn it, Tony. What the fuck?

“See you later,” he manages, the words like ash in his mouth.
“I will see you this afternoon,” Loki agrees, and Tony exits stage left. Like hell is Tony going to see him that afternoon. He’s going to isolate himself and wallow in shame like the adult he is.

Unnur is pissed, but happy to see him. She greets him with a crusty, sooty rag to his face.

“What the fuck? What the fuck? What in Hel’s name was that yesterday?” Tony opens his mouth to explain, but Unnur tsks and turns on her heel to pick up the file she was working with before Tony walked in. “You tell me you’re mixed up with a fugitive from Odin Allfather, and then you vanis? Literally, I might add. You’re such an ass. I was worried fucking sick.” She angrily files away the burs from a series of punched holes, metal filings dusting the work space around her. Tony settles in to let her work out her frustration. That’s the best course of action with her, as far as he is aware.

She chews him out big-time, but Tony has come to know it just means she cares. He bears it without fuss, even cracking a smile at some of her choicer insults. Rot-brained bilgesnipe isn’t something he’s ever been called before, and he doesn’t even know what that is. It’s a decent distraction from his monumental fuck-up.

She slams the file down on the table again, and Tony approaches, arms outstretched. Unnur eyes his suspiciously- she knows of his aversion to touch- but the smith bridges the gap between them. Tony folds his arms around her, and she tucks her head against his shoulder.

“I’m fine, see? I got really high and Santa Claus acquitted me.”

“Who the fuck is Santa Claus?”

“Odin. He’s got the beard for the job.”

“You make no sense.” Unnur is quiet, and so is Tony. Only the pop of the fire in her forge fills the room.

“You ever run off to maybe be arrested again, and I’ll kick your ass.”

This startles a full, honest laugh out of Tony. He pats her awkwardly on the back, then lets her go.

“I’ll remember that next time.”

They step apart, and Unnur takes her hair out of its ragged bun to fix it back again. Tony can’t help but prod.

“There sure are a ton of things that end in you kicking my ass.”

Without missing a beat, Unnur shoots back, “Well someone has to keep an idiot like you in line. Now grab some steel and pull me some files. This one’s shit, and we don’t have many left.”

Tony obeys, and starts off on a small set of double-sided flat files. He’ll move on to triangle files and half-rounds later. Unnur allocates her scrap steel and lower-grade materials to simple tools like files. Metal of better quality would last much longer, but the smith keeps that for actual paid-for pieces. Not that she gets many of those, but it’s the principle of the matter.

It’s boring, easy work for Tony, but that’s all he really needs at the moment. He’s a little too frazzled to do anything more intricate, and even though Unnur is distracting herself smoothing out hinges, she notices.

“Now what is it? I thought you said everything turned out fine.”
Tony is silent as he scores a bastard edge onto one side of the flat tiles. Maybe if he stays really quiet, Unnur will forget she asked anything.

It doesn’t work.

“Hey!” she barks. “Mister moopy! You look like you accidentally kicked a puppy. Talk to me, Tony.”

He glances up at Unnur, then back to the files. His shoulders lift in a shrug.

“I… may have kissed a friend who probably didn’t want to be kissed. No biggie.”

“Well shit.”

And doesn’t that just some everything up. He might have just screwed a promising friendship over, he thinks miserably. Why the hell would Loki want to stay acquainted with him now?

“Yeah. Exactly.”

Unnur picks back up with her filing, blowing away the metallic dust. With one hand, she shields the ointment-covered cut on her face.

“Was she angry?”

“Uh… he.”

“Ah. That’s a little trickier.”

That’s an understatement. Asgard isn’t exactly friendly to people who aren’t straight, from what he’s seen and heard. He’s sure Loki isn’t going to be biased against Tony just because he’s also a man, but that doesn’t mean Tony hasn’t put in in a delicate spot. Not to mention that bluntly put, Tony just sexually assaulted someone he’s only just come to terms with thinking of as a friend. God, he’s really fucked this up.

“He wasn’t angry. He didn’t really say anything at all.”

“Maybe just apologize, then? Or just pretend it never happened. Unless… Were you trying to start an affair?”

“What? No! No. He’s a friend. Just a friend. It was a mistake.”

“Then you tell him that. There. All fixed. You go on with your lives as ‘just friends’.”

IT’s sound advice, from someone who’s willing to risk everything to avoid relationships. At least, it is in Tony’s mind. He’ll have to remember that if Loki manages to pin him down.

If.

Chapter End Notes

Also, for those of you hoping for a sex scene: I’m not going to be writing any. Sex will likely be implied at certain points, but while I enjoy reading a good smut fic, I’m a completely sex-repulsed asexual, and I really just don’t have any interest in writing it
out. If any of you lovelies happen to feel inspired, have at it! But please, be respectful of the fact that the Tony Stark of this fiction is a sex-positive asexual. If you aren’t sure what that means, ask me, and I’ll happily give you some resources!

As always, comments and kudos give me extra hearts.
Eighteen

Chapter Notes

I've realized that when I write, I leave off halfway through words sometimes. This becomes obvious because I use a different color ink every time I sit down to write. So I'll have 'N' in pink, and 'ething' in blue, so that's neat.

Also, in this universe the dwarves live on Muspelheim. They originally lives alongside the dark elves on Svartalfheim, but during the war between the dark elves and Asgard, they fled to Muspelheim and rebuilt their kingdom there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s a little weird not having to keep out of sight. He can eat when he wants, walk where he wants, and the only black bird he catches the attention of is that delinquent blackbird with its little white ‘eyebrow’. The puffball now sports ruffled feathers amidst patches of down, and every now and then Tony will catch sight of it- him, he decides- hopping from branch to branch in the garden. Tony names him Dave.

Dave likes to keep Tony in his beady little gaze. The inventor might have worried with Dave had imprinted on him like a baby duck given how the bird climbs him like a jungle-gym every time he stands still long enough, but he sees full-grown birds taking care of the fledgling crow, and he prefers to believe they’re the parents. Still, for whatever reason, Dave likes to watch as Tony walks through the garden.

Tony doesn’t mind the crow’s curiosity, but he does mind Thor’s. In between hiding from Loki and avoiding Odin like the plague, Tony accidentally runs into Thor. The prince is less of a blonde and more of a redhead, but just barely. The first thing Thor does is try to clap Tony on the shoulder, which Tony shies away from, leaving the big guy hanging.

Thor tries to muscle Tony into regaling him and his four friends with ‘tales of his travels’, as if Tony has been purposefully hopping through time. He wriggles out of it, citing a previous engagement with Loki. It’s a bold faced lie, but Thor swallows it without question.

What follows is a strange dance of avoidance. Tony’s list of people he doesn’t want to interact with includes Eir, Odin, Loki, Thor, and Frigga, at the moment. The only reason Frigga makes the list is that he’s too ashamed to face her after assaulting her son.

He definitely looks ridiculous hiding or running away when someone on his list comes around, but hey. It gets the job done.

At least it does until four days later, when he passes a pillar only to have a hand shoot out from behind it and fist in his shirt. Tony’s arms fly up, one guarding his face and the other cracking down on his assailant’s arm. His heart thunders in his chest, and he’s a little lightheaded with the sudden adrenaline. The hand releases him.

“Tony?”

His name filters through his awareness. It’s watery and thin, and it’s repeated twice more before
Loki’s face swims into view. The prince reaches out to cup Tony’s face, but the inventor flinches away.

“Don’t touch me,” he rasps, grimacing at the sound of his own voice. He’s pretty sure at any sort of contact is going to overwhelm him at the moment.

Loki’s hand drops uselessly to his side. Tony runs his hands through his too-long hair and counts. One, two, three, four…

He gets to four hundred and fifty six before he feels collected-enough to address the situation. Loki, to his credit, waits patiently.

“Haven’t we already discussed why it’s bad to scare a guy with a heart condition?”

“Yes, but you have been avoiding me.”

“What? No I haven’t.”

The look Loki levels Tony with could peel the paint off walls. Tony flinches under its weight, too high-strung to handle the disappointment his traitorous brain whispers the look implies. Loki’s expression immediately shifts to concern, which Tony hates. Never has he thought ‘Oh, you know what I could go for? Some fucking pity.’ He flicks up a hand as Loki opens his mouth to speak.

“We aren’t going to talk about it. Ah-ah! No. You might want to talk about it, but I don’t. It’s nothing.”

“Very well,” Loki allows with reluctance.

Tony is aware that it’s a bit hypocritical of himself to deny an explanation when he himself has been so pushy about getting Loki to spill his worries, but he likes to think that if Loki had been adamant, he would have dropped the subject.

“Let’s get back to the why of the matter.” Tony scrubs a tired hand across his face. “What’s with the jump-scare?”

“You were avoiding me.” Aaaand we’re right back to that. “Every time I approached you fled. I could not think of any other way to gain your attention.”

“My attention. Right, uh, on that subject…” Time to rip off the bandaid. “Look, I’m sorry for making an ass of myself. It wasn’t fair to spring a, uh, a kiss on you. Like that. It was a mistake. I wasn’t really thinking clearly.”

When he dares to look at Loki again, the prince is frigid. Damn. Way to go, Tony. Bringing up an uncomfortable situation. He probably should have just let it drop and forgotten about it.

“A mistake,” Loki repeats, voice flat. “I see.”

“Loki, I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. It’s just-”

“No, I understand. You weren’t thinking clearly. No harm was done.”

Tony knows he ought to feel relief at being let off the hook so easily, but something isn’t sitting right with him. He eyes Loki warily.

“You sure you aren’t mad?”
“Absolutely.” Loki gives him a sharp, brittle smile. He holds himself aloof and distant. Tony aches to bridge the gap, but he’s already fucked up enough for the moment. Maybe it’s best to give Loki his space. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

The prince brushes past Tony, his boots clicking primly against marble flooring. Tony blinks, confused, and spins to watch him leave.

“I thought you wanted my attention?” he calls, voice lifting in question. Tony winces at the needy tone his words take on.

Loki doesn’t even bother turning to face the inventor. He just keeps walking.

“And I had it. I don’t want it anymore,” Loki tosses over his shoulder in response. His hands are white fists at his sides.

Tony is left alone and confused. He resigns himself to having to work harder for Loki’s forgiveness. He’s definitely pissed the prince off. Things aren’t any better at dinner, either. Tony finds himself roped into sitting down with Thor and his buddies. Loki is there, but he only talks when prodded. Eventually the inventor just gives up.

Apart from Thor and Loki, there are four other people hanging out there. A blonde called Fandral, and Japanese-looking guy named Hogun who can’t really be Japanese considering the human-ban, and a burlier dude called Volstagg make up the men of the party. A chick named Sif is there as well. They focus on Tony at first, peppering him with questions and introductions, but before long they lose interest. Tony is chafing under all the direct attention after after so long in hiding, both on Earth and in Asgard. It’s a bit of a relief when they turn their attention elsewhere.

After that it seems to be Loki’s turn to avoid him. Tony keeps seeking him out, trying to worm his way back into Loki’s favor with little gifts- things he makes with unwanted scrap at Unnur’s place, mostly- but apart from dinners with him Tony sees neither hide nor hair of the elusive prince. Those dinners don’t really count either. Loki uses Thor as a buffer between them, so Tony never gets a chance to talk with him directly.

Frigga brings up the matter when Tony finally brings himself to attend Frigga’s daily afternoon tea. He comes clean about kissing her son. He won’t meet her eyes, bracing himself for the condemnation he knows is coming. He knows how this works. He fucks up, she finds out, he loses her approval and her. It already seems to be working that way with Loki.

When did he even start to care about them? He shouldn’t have. It was a fucking awful move on his part, given his history. But god damn him, he’s been without a trustworthy parental-figure since he was twenty-one, and he’s been without friends since a SI-patented alloy peeled off a set of plane wings and sent the whole craft spiraling out of the sky with Rhodey in it. He’s weak.

“Loki has already spoken of this with me,” Frigga tells him gently. Tony gets this horrible sinking feeling in his chest.

“Yeah? And what’d he say?”

“It isn’t my play to say. I do not wish to break his trust any more than I wish to break yours. You should talk with him.”

“I tried that. It only made things worse.”

“Then perhaps you did not truly address the heart of the matter. Try again, if you think it important.”
And fuck. What’s he supposed to say to that? Oh course rescuing this friendship with Loki is important. It’s just… He’s great at bullshitting his way through social interactions but even when he thinks he’s being sincere, there’s a nigglng worry that he’s lying, both to others and himself. How do you go about making amends if even you don’t trust yourself?

Nothing happens for a whole ‘nother week, but Loki stays stubborn in avoiding him, and Tony kind of gives up on seeking him out. Loki probably still just needs space to cool off. It’s the least Tony can do to give it to him.

No, when Tony finally gets to talk face-to-face with Loki, he does so because the prince is waiting for him in the garden Tony walks through every goddamn day.

To his credit, Tony isn’t startled this time. To Loki’s credit, he doesn’t scare the shit out of Tony. He appears to have simply picked a spot on the winding path, planted himself there, and waited stiffly for Tony to happen by. Well, here he is.

“Hey there, princess,” Tony greets, forcing himself to be cheeky and upbeat as if they haven’t been dancing around eachother. “Fancy meeting you here.”

Loki is silent, looking over Tony’s shoulder as if the mere sight of the human is unbearable. Tony deflates a little.

“I’m leaving Asgard tonight.”

His heart fucking drops in the moment it takes Tony to process.

“You’re… what?”

Christ, had he really fucked up that bad? That Loki felt the need to just leave his goddamn home? He brings a grimy hand to his chest and tap tap tap tap tap tap tap taps at the reactor, the sound muffled by his shirt. What was it he could have done differently? How could he make Loki stay?

“No I’m not,” he snaps defensively. He is. He totally is. Fucking christ on a cracker, why can’t he have a normal conversation without freaking out? Start men are iron. This isn’t how he should be.

“Please, tell me what upset you.”

Tony scratches at the covered, raised scars around the reactor casing as he admits, “I know I fucked up, and I know you’re, uh, mad at me, but I didn’t mean- I just- Look, are you leaving to get away from me? I can stop looking for you. I can stay out of sight, or, or, or something.”

“What? No. No, Tony, you’d have to work a lot harder than this to scare me off.” He’s indescribably grateful Loki isn’t taking a page from Tony’s book and playing this off with humor. “Thor is being sent to the dwarves on a diplomatic visit. I will accompany him to ensure he doesn’t start a war.”

Okay. Okay, that’s much better than Tony’s assumption that Loki now hates him so much that he wants to leave. Which was an overreaction, yeah, but he’s good at those.

“I’ll be gone for three weeks. Do you think you can handle that?”

Alright, now Loki’s teasing him. Tony rolls his eyes, fingers still on the reactor, but now he’s finally stopped tapping.
“Uh, yeah. Course I can.”

There’s a frantic flapping, and Tony gets smacked in the face with a black wing as Dave comes careening in to land on Tony’s shoulder. And of course it’s Dave. Dave is the only raggedy, muppet-looking crow Tony’s met that he has also decided he likes people enough to come right up to them. He knows there’s at least one full-grown crow in the trees keeping an eye on the scene.

Loki looks at Tony like he’s grown a second head as the inventor holds up a hand. Tony has learned that Dave likes to nibble, and if Tony doesn’t offer his fingers, his ear will pay the price instead. The bird caws at Loki, cocking his ragged head and then, true to form, turns his attention to play with Tony’s fingers.

“You have… tamed a crow?”

“Not really? I mean, he just kind of makes himself known if I stay put for too long. I think he’s still kind of a baby.”

But then again what the fuck did Tony know about birds?

“She’s a fledgling,” Loki corrects instantly. He extends a hand. “May I?”

“Yeah, sure, if you can convince him. Just be careful. Dave’s a little nippy. Why do you think he’s a she?”

Loki shuffles closer and offers his hand for Dave to step on. He (or she?) flutters over without hesitation.

“Trust me. Dave is a hen.”

Dave also adores Loki. She plays with his hair and fiddles with all the shiny, noisy bits on his outfit, making this weird chuffing rattle in her throat every now and then. It’s pretty damn cute to be honest, and Tony can’t bring himself to be upset anymore.

“I put her back in her nest a while back, when she was still just a fluffball. She’s kind of been obsessed ever since.”

There’s something Loki knows, but he isn’t sharing with the class. Dave throws herself back to Tony a few moments later, and he winces as her short nails dig into his shoulder for balance. A throaty caw sounds from the trees, and Dave immediately launches away, ragged wings pumping to bring her back to the safety of the branches. Tony rolls his shoulders and looks back to Loki.

“You know, your mom and I have tea most days. I mean, she has tea. I have juice. Do you like tea? You do. I know you do. Wanna join today?”

“I must finish preparing for my trip with Thor.” He rubs the palm of one hand with his other thumb. “Take care, Tony.”

And with a flourish of green, he’s gone again.

“Yeah. You too, I guess.”

Chapter End Notes
I’m getting so many questions about asexuality! It actually makes me really happy. My identity is very important to me, and it makes me feel good to conceptualize a fictional character I admire as similar to me. I’m also really excited to spread awareness. People like me are frequently told that we aren’t LGBT, that we don’t experience ‘enough oppression’ to be a part of that community, but beyond the fact that no one should have to justify that they hurt enough to be a part of a community, they don’t understand that we face corrective rape, conversion therapy, verbal, physical, and emotional abuse, assault, and still have our identity listed as a mental illness in the DSM. There’s been an adendum that ‘hyposexuality’ is only a mental illness if the person experiences distress from it, but because it’s such a relatively unknown subset of people, many people experience distress, thinking they are broken or defective for not experiencing this mythical sexual attraction the world keeps telling them about. Did you know there’s now a legitimate medication meant to drug women with ‘female sexual desire disorder’ into being more receptive to sex? It’s called flibanserin, by the way.

Edit: If you have questions about orientations or identities mentioned in this fiction and don’t want to have them posted in the comments (which I will answer as well. I’m not trying to farm emails), shoot me an email at identityquestions@gmail.com. No matter how old this fic gets, I’ll be happy to answer any questions or point you in the right direction to get the answers you want. Please don’t hesitate to ask. I’m not easily offended by most invasive questions, but if you choose to send me antagonistic comments intended to harass me or insult identities you don’t understand or agree with, I will send you a response asking for clarification in case it was simply a poor choice of words. After that, if the problem persists I won't respond. I solemnly swear I won't record any contact information, I won't give anyone your information (ever), and I won't send you unsolicited emails if you choose to contact me in this way. Please don’t ask me questions or send me comments about this fiction via email. It’s for LGBTQ+ questions only.

Anyways, coming off my soapbox, would it be helpful to anyone if I wrote short ‘previously on’ summaries of what’s happened so far in the chapter summaries when I post?
I think my school-year update schedule is going to be every other monday or tuesday. I got a little distracted this week by making a lab-meeting presentation and sheltering from the remnants of Irma. It wasn't terrible, but the power suffered.

True to his word, Loki leaves that night. Tony can kind of see him, as well as thor, maybe, and a bunch of other people on horses. He stands in one of the frankly-dangerous open arch-window things higher up in the palace and watches the trot of distant horses across this opal-looking bridge into fucking space. Well, into a golden christmas ball, but that shoots them into space. He’s dying to get his greasy little fingers into that golden dome and see what makes it tick.

Frigga tells it the next day that he would need some guy called Heimdall to give him permission is he wanted to explore the Bifrost thing, but Heimdall answers to Odin, and Odin doesn’t like Tony. It’s a shame, really. As much fun as smithing outside a cave is, Tony longs to engineer.

Working under Unnur is never boring, though. The second day after Loki’s departure, Tony slots together what feels like countless little hinges ordered by a carpenter, while Unnur goes over her finances. It’s mindless work, but it needs doing. The appearance of a duck amidst the monotony is unexpected, strange, and altogether surreal.

It flies in through the uncovered roof, flapping wildly until it’s webbed black feet slap against the forge’s stone floor. He shares an incredulous, bewildered look with Unnur. Tony hasn’t seen any ducks around Asgard. Songbirds, crows, ravens, owls, hawks, even geese. But not ducks.

The bird is red-eyed, with brown plumage speckled white. A shimmery blue stripe slashes across each wing, and it waddles around, black beak parted to quack quack quack. It marches right up to Unnur and ruffles its feathers, sticking out one leg. A piece of rolled-up paper is tied to the leg.

“What in Hel’s name…”

Tony props his elbow on the table and rests his chin in his hands. Unnur bends over and awkwardly wraps her hands around the bird’s body. It doesn’t make a fuss, and Unnur sets it on the table in front of her. She takes the paper from the duck and unrolls it.

“Well? Who sent you duck-mail?”

Tony reaches out to run his fingers over the duck’s stubby tail, but he gets a hiss and a nip for his trouble. Tony didn’t even know ducks could hiss.

“No one, actually. This one’s gotten lost.”

“How do you know?”

“Well, the message starts off with ‘My dear brother’. I get the feeling that isn’t me,” the smith remarks drily. She doesn’t read any farther than the greeting, but she does reach for a scrap of paper herself. Unnur scribbles a little note down, then rolls the two messages together. “Get some
water; see if it’s thirsty.” She waves the notes around. “I’m gonna send it back and explain that it got lost, but I guess it’s nice to offer water?”

The duck, for its part, is preening its broad beak through its feathers. Tony shuffles away to fill a small bowl with water. The duck takes a few swallows, and Unnur fastens the note back to its leg.

“Oh, go home, I guess,” she orders, prodding the bird into taking flight. The duck labors up and out, quacking indignantly as it goes. It’s a weird experience, and that perception doesn’t seem to be due to a cultural difference. “I can honestly say I’ve never seen a messenger duck.”

“Yeah, that seems kind of strange. What happens if it goes for a swim?”

“You know, I didn’t think of that. What does happen?”

Tony shrugs, dumping the water down the drain. That seems like it should be the end of their feathered misadventure, but a duck - a different one with yellow eyes - comes back in two days.

“Again? Who is this person and why do their ducks keep getting lost?”

Unnur has the message unrolled in her hands, and unreadable expression on her face. This time it seems she’s said ‘to hell with privacy’ and reads the whole thing.

“It’s addressed to me, actually.”

Or not. No breach in privacy if the letter’s meant for her.

“Oh really? Does that mean you know who uses ducks to send letters?”

Unnur shakes her head. The paper rustles in her hands.

“It’s just signed ‘I’.”

“Well, what is ‘I’ writing to you about?”

They’re grateful I sent the letter back and respected their privacy for not reading it.”

“And?”

There has to be an ‘and’ in there somewhere. Unnur rolls her eyes and flicks the paper.

“And they found my message to be charming. Not sure how, though. I didn’t write much.”

“Are you gonna write back again?”

“I don’t see why not. It’s not every day I get a letter via duck.”

But that’s the thing. It does become an everyday thing. A ‘several times a day’ thing in fact. Ducks keep coming in and going out, ferrying little notes and letters. Unnur stops to respond when she can, but the messengers wait patiently when she can’t. The whole thing would be way fucking simpler with a phone to text on, but for whatever reason the space vikings haven’t invented cell phones to go along with their touch-screen tubs and fancy medical equipment.

Unnur keeps a bowl of drinking water and a plate of pear out for the fucks to nibble at. They still hiss and nip if Tony tries to pet them, but they have no problem with letting Unnur stroke their feathers. Fine. Whatever. He bets Dave would be selective in his favor and nip at Unnur, at least. No, actually, that’s a bold-faced lie. Dave’s a slut for head-rubs. As far as Tony knows he’s the
only one she gets them from, but he doesn’t doubt the possibility of the crow throwing herself at anyone promising ‘scritches’.

Now that Tony’s more experienced- he’s a damn quick learner- Unnur is comfortable letting him do the heavy work so she can do finishing work at the same time. Polishing, filing, etching, fastening… It isn’t that she prefers these jobs due to any sort of difficulty level, but rather that she wants to be the one to quality-check everything, to make sure everything produced in her forge is miles above what it should be. After all, she has to do twice the work for half the credit. Any slip-up would be disastrous.

As a bonus, it gives her time to write back to the mysterious ‘I’. Tony catches a sappy little smile she probably doesn’t even know is there, from time to time. It’s kind of adorable, actually. Tony might tease her about her mystery-crush, if he didn’t think she would finally make good on her threats to punch him. Tony just hopes ‘I’ is female, for Unnur’s sake.

He gets to find out nearly three weeks after the first duck mistakenly flew through the roof. Tony enters Unnur’s forge to see her twirling a delicate metal lily between her fingers. Tony doesn’t know when she found the time to make it, and it’s the first time he’s really seen her craft anything artsy.

“Whatcha got there?” he asks, setting down the small bundled lunch he brought.

“This? It’s nothing important.” She sets the lily down with a slight clink. “Ready to get to work?”

It isn’t nothing, though. Unnur just needs another day to pluck up her courage. The next morning Tony comes in to see Unnur fretfully searching through her drawers. Tony raps on the doorway to signal his arrival.

“Just a second. Ah! There. I knew I still had it.” She turns around, brandishing a gold disk. Tony cocks an eyebrow. “You’re going on an adventure today.”

“Oh boy, and adventure?”

“Don’t be a shit about it. I just need you to deliver something for me.”

She swipes her thumb across the small, palm-sized disk. White lines zigzag out from the touch and spiral up into the air a few inches, consolidating into a lacey webwork. He stares for a moment before recognizing the device for what it is: a navigational system.

“I haven’t had to use one of these in ages, but you’re not from around here. You’ll need directions.”

“Where am I going?”

“Oh, Geldwald, actually.”

The way she says his destination has Tony thinking it’s an important place, that it’s something he should know, but he’s drawing a blank.

“Explain that for the unenlightened. What’s Geldwald?”

Surprise flickers over Unnur’s face, which is actually pretty funny. She just said she knows that Tony is a foreigner. How would she expect Tony to know the name of what he assumes to be some neighborhood or something. Does Asgard have boroughs?

“It’s the garden around Idunn’s grove. Eir has her herbs and medicinal plants cultivated there. I
think I’ve been corresponding with one of the garden attendants. I just…” She gestures to the wrought lily on her table. “Can you take this there? I was supposed to go meet them today, but, uh, I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

“Cold feet?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

Tony accepts his mission with all due solemnity. That is, he prods and teases at Unnur mercilessly until she all but chases him out the door in outrage. He laughs to himself as he walks, looking down at the navigation system. Honestly, if these Asgardians have GPS disks, why don’t they have cell phones?

He fiddles with the disk, the lily tucked under one arm, and tries to figure out how to work it. The text floating around isn’t made for English-speakers, but he’s sure there’s a way to change that.

It then occurs to Tony that he might accidentally change the destination Unnur programmed and end up completely lost. Maybe it’s best to hold off on the fidgeting, then.

The disk leads him back to the more opulent side of Asgard. The buildings are taller, the gold more polished, and around the corner Tony reaches Geldwald.

It’s a vibrant splash of cool green against an endless sea of gold. Buildings rise tall all around, but Geldwald is separated from the urban sprawl by a wide, clean cobbled street. It’s... idyllic. Flower carts and street-stalls, children playing and laughing, well-dressed people strolling along… It’s kind of like a more touristy, elegant market area. Like an upscale version of the sidewalks around Central Park, complete with beggars that everyone pretends they don’t see. Beggars simply aren’t fashionable, therefore they don’t exist. Tony isn’t proud of it, but he’s been guilty of the same mindset too. Acknowledging a problem isn’t the same as addressing it.

There’s nothing he can do about it now. In New York he’d donated heavily to homeless shelters and rehabilitation centers. It’s a point of shame that he doesn’t know whether the donations continued after he crawled deep into the bottle. Anyways, here it’s a different story.

He weaves through the ambling people to the sturdy, really just decorative golden gate. Decorative in that it won’t do a thing to keep anyone out, or in. The only thing dividing Geldwald from the surrounding city is a waist-high stone wall. So yeah, Tony walks right in. He doesn’t really know how he’s supposed to find ‘I’, but he supposes finding a duck pond would be a good start.

There are more trees here than Central Park. Less of a grassy expanse with copses of woodland and more of a woodland with clearings of grass. He sees people on picnics, people on horses, people sailing little wooden boats down streams, but all in all, Geldwald doesn’t contain as many people as he would have expected.

Geldwald is also much larger than he had expected. Tony wishes his GPS disk would give him more directions, but it shut down as soon as he passed through the front gate. He’s apparently arrived at his destination, but he’s also a bit unsure how to proceed.

So he follows a path. You’re supposed to turn left to get out of a maze, right? Or was it right? This isn’t a maze, but Tony does decide to turn left when he can. This does get him somewhere. Where...?

He’s not sure. He sees another wall through the trees, this one far more than waist-high. This wall reaches at least ten feet into the air. It’s solid and strong, built of mossy rounded stone. Tony can’t
find a gate at first, so he just picks a direction-left- and keeps walking. The door he does eventually find is small and unassuming in comparison to the wall. It’s also unlocked. The door closes behind him, and Tony needs a moment to just take in the view.

The garden before him is bright and lush. Raised boxes of plantlife sprawl out in a gentle meander, and smooth river pebbles line the walkways between. A small gazebo draped in climbing vines sits a ways away, and hummingbirds flit to and fro before Tony’s eyes. He hears the gurgle of a fountain, smells the rich warmth of dirt. And yes, there’s a duck. Singular. It waddles in and out of view down one pebble-lined aisle, quacking softly.

Tony takes that to mean he’s in the right place.

He pockets the disk and struts down one aisle, between rows of lush, healthy (he thinks. He’s no plant expert) flora. Fuck, the flowers dotted around smell heavenly. Flowers give way to other green things, and he sees a grove of trees not too far off, with a little cottage settled before them. To his right and left, people in sturdy, oddly-elegant yet probably functional clothing are dotted through the garden, tending the plants. He meets the eyes of one man, but no one comes forward to ask him what the hell he thinks he’s doing. Tony is actually the one to make first contact. He asks for directions to a duck pond, which he receives without issue.

The pond is just as carefully-cultivated as the rest of the gardens. Tony recognizes irises and lily pads and not much else. Oh! The ducks. He recognizes the ducks. He thumbs the petals of the metal lily, simply observing. The pond’s edge is several yards away from the back of the cottage. Infringing feels a hell of a lot like trespassing. After a moment’s thought, he changes course to knock on the cottage’s front door instead.

This pays off. A woman answers the door after a moment. Tony isn’t usually earnestly hung-up on beauty, but Tony’s first impression is that she has the most mathematically-perfect face of anyone he’s ever seen.

“Hello, can I help you?” she greets warily.

Tony runs a hand over his freshly-shaved jaw. How does he put this? How do you locate someone based on a single initial?

“Yeah, uh, I’m looking for someone who goes by ‘I’ and uses ducks as messengers. I have this for them.”

Tony holds up the lily. The woman’s eyes light up.

“May I?” She reaches out for the lily, and Tony surrenders it without fuss. She tuck one of her tight braids behind her ear as she looks it over, then glances up at him. “Am I to assume you are Unnur?”

Relief floods Tony. Oh, good. He’s not lost.

“No, actually. I’m her, uh, student. She’s a woman, by the way. Hope that’s alright. And you are…?”

I grins.

“If you don’t know already, I think I won’t tell you. If Unnur wants my name, she’ll need to come see me in person.”

Alone, the words could be biting and dismissive, but Tony doesn’t miss the playful gleam in I’s,
well, eyes. She does, however, guide Tony away from the cottage and towards one of the raised garden boxes. Deft hands search through tall green stems, and I clips off a living lily with petals like a sunburst, which she hands to Tony.

“Please take this to Unnur, and please: tell her I really would like to meet her.”

Unnur, of course, is delighted by the flower she receives in turn. She peppers Tony with a question after question, bordering on interrogation as they work. He has to wonder how long it’s been since Unnur has had any sort of social life. She seems to be falling head over heels for someone she’s never met, with only a few weeks of correspondence at best. How much of that is genuine attraction and how much is just a lonely girl looking to break her isolation? Tony keeps his mouth shut. Unnur is an adult. She can make her own decisions and her own mistakes. He just hopes it all works out.

Worrying about Unnur’s social life, however, does not stop him from worrying when Loki doesn’t come home on time.

Chapter End Notes

It's probably painfully-obvious who Unnur's pen-pal is, but shh. Let me pretend I'm being mysterious.

Also, That whole 'mathematically-perfect face' thing? That happened to me when I was working. Some guy came into the shop I work in, and he had the most mathematically-perfect face I've ever seen. It was amazing. Shame I'm not interested in guys.

Also, a reminder that I'll answer any questions about LGBT+ identities at identityquestions@gmail.com. If something is outside my realm of knowledge, I'll point you in the right direction to learn.

Check out this awesome art! It wasn't made for this fiction, but I have permission from the artist to post a link. Go follow them on Tumblr! http://cptstarkasm.tumblr.com/post/165491698516/tony-stark-engineer-and-mechanic-making-iron

And lastly, as always comments, kudos, and text hearts are the wind beneath my wings.
Twelve

Chapter Notes

Ahh... Nothing makes me feel more like an author than slipping in one little line foreshadowing something it'll probably take me another year to get to... I'm not kidding when I say I have the whole thing outlined to the very end.

Anywho, enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Odin vanishes not long after Loki misses his return date. Mercel, on the other hand, continues to prowl the palace like one of Scar's hyenas from the Lion King. Tony doesn't go out of the way to cross her path, but he does see her from time to time. She eyes him the way a cat eyes a caged bird. It makes Tony's skin crawl.

He still doesn't have the balls to ask Frigga what Mercel's story is, and his relationship with Loki was either too tentative or too strained to really ask him either. So the living bronze statue remains a mystery.

Tony does chat with Frigga about what might be keeping her sons so long. He already knew about the basics. Thor and Loki get to go play nice with some dwarves. The queen adds a few more details into the mix. As princes of Asgard and future rulers, the brothers are expected to work for the betterment of their home. At the moment this means strengthening relationships with allies, like the dwarves.

There was a wrinkle, though. Loki went a step too far when playing a sort of game called flyting, and Odin needs to sort things out. Frigga doesn't seem too worried, though, so Tony tries to follow her example.

He's curious about flyting, though. Frigga explains it to him, but she begs off practicing with him, citing a lack of interest in the verbal sport. It's kind of like a rap battle, actually, which Tony finds hilarious. In a sense, two people exchange insults and taunts, sometimes rhyming. This can either be followed by a proper fight or done just for the hell of it.

Unnur's game, though.

"I'm not exactly practiced," she warns, sliding a bar into the coals to soften. "I used to do it with my brother when we were small."

They throw little jabs at each other, testing the waters. It feels clumsy and harsh just insulting Unnur. Tony doesn't really like it.

"Yeah, well, usually you'd be doing it in front of other people. It's more fun when they laugh."

Tony's been known to be a tease, but he isn't sure he can really get into this flyting business. Maybe when Loki gets back he'll be willing to 'flyte'. Flyte. Is that a word? Tony doesn't know. What he does know is that there's an intellectual click between the two of them, and that Tony misses Loki. Not that he'll say it. Stark men are iron, and that means being independent.
He can’t help but remember the kiss sometimes. Honestly, he wouldn’t trade the memory away for the world, but he’d happily give up the consequences.

Unnur isn’t having much luck with her paramour either. She still can’t pluck up the courage to meet her pen pal. He’s half-convinced she’ll be rejected for being a woman, despite Tony’s assurances that this mystery girl hadn’t seemed put off by the idea of a relationship with another lady. It’s weird to see ‘I’ll punch you if you piss me off’ Unnur so unsteady, but he supposes that’s what puppy love does to people.

Frigga is otherwise occupied when he returns to the palace, so no juice and cookies with her today. That’s fine. As much as Tony likes the witty queen, he’s not a people person outside of public performances like galas and interviews. It’s probably for the best that he gets a break now and then. As he meanders to his room, intent on rinsing off the sweat and grime of a day’s work, he laments the fact that he didn’t quote Monty Python’s French taunters earlier with Unnur. ‘Your mother was a hamster and your father smelt of elderberries’ is possibly his favorite insult ever.

He doesn’t actually intend to go to sleep that evening. Really. Truly. All Tony wants is to rewire his slowly-mending suit with more of that ‘vein’ stuff, but somewhere between sitting down on the floor of his room and cracking open the shell of his armor, he drifts off. Back propped against the wall, head lolling to the side, he dozes.

Right up until someone nestles against his side.

Tony wakes with a start, heart pounding a frantic staccato against the reactor as he flinches away from the contact. He kicks a shoulder plate across the floor in his haste, and it takes a moment to recognize the newcomer. Squinting in the starlight, Tony makes out the form of one sharp-tongued prince, his face blocked by a mess of curly black hair.


Loki doesn’t respond. Doesn’t move. Doesn’t even look up at Tony. Warning bells start going off in Tony’s head. The prince rubs the meat of his thumb into his palm in slow, repetitive circles.

“Loki? Princess? Are you okay?”

Tony shifts onto his knees, the lingering terror of being woken by an unknown touch vanishing in the face of this new concern. He reaches out on an impulse to cup Loki’s face, to turn the prince towards him, but Loki flinches away, his curtain of hair swaying with the movement. Okay, definitely not good.

“Hey there, baby. Look at me. C’mon, I’ll take care of you.” Tony knows he’s babbling, but something isn’t right. There’s this sinking feeling in his gut, but while he keeps his hand extended, hovering a few inches from Loki, he doesn’t touch without permission. He waits, watches in concern as Loki slowly wears away at the skin of his palm, but his patience pays off. Loki leans his cheek into Tony’s hand. Careful not to spook the prince, he guides Loki into looking at him. Without the fall of hair blocking Tony’s line of sight, Tony’s mouth goes dry. Loki’s eyes are rimmed red, as though he’s been crying. He won’t meet Tony’s gaze, but he doesn’t have to. Tony can see the issue well enough in the moonlight.

His mouth is sewn shut.

“Oh my god. What- Hold on; I’ll be right back.”
Tony scrambles up to his feet, heart pounding. What the *fuck*? How did Loki come all the way from another planet and make it up to Tony’s room without someone noticing the state of his mouth? How is it that Tony is the first person to help?

He turns on the room’s lamps until everything is softly-lit. Upon further inspection, Loki’s lips are sewn with one long piece of thread-like wire. The flush wire cutter is mercifully easy to fine. He considers a file, but the wire is thin anyways, and he doesn’t want to risk getting metal filings in the wounds. Loki shies away when Tony tries to clip the wire.

“I’ll be careful, babe. We need to get this off you. C’mere.”

He cups Loki’s face again to stabilize the sharp-tongues trickster. This time when he brings the wire cutter up the golden thread, Loki holds his ground. Tony goes through and snips each of the twenty two loops, one by one. The wire is crusted with blood, and the skin around is inflamed and bright red. Tony tries to slip free the cut threads with his fingers, but every slight touch has his friend flinching and whining in his throat. He cleans off a pair of fine pliers and tugs the cut threads free instead. They fall to the floor, but the slip of wire through Loki’s lips has them bleeding again. Tears track their way down Loki’s cheeks, and when he’s finally free he gasps, pitching forward to hide his face against Tony’s shoulder. The inventor freezes, pliers hanging loosely from his fingers. Loki is shaking like a leaf, and when Tony places an unsteady hand on the prince’s back, he can tell Loki’s heart is racing.

There’s a special sort of exhaustion that comes after trauma, and though Tony doesn’t know the specifics around the lip-sewing, he’d bet his reactor that whatever it was, it was pretty damn traumatic. He doesn’t want to maneuver Loki from the floor, to disturb him once he hits that inevitable exhaustion, so Tony coaxes the prince up and over, the pair of them collapsing onto the bed. What did Rhodey do for him when Pepper was buried? Uh, took away the bottle of Macallan he’d been swallowing like water, forced him to take a shower, and then maybe there was cuddling? There was definitely holding. Tony was held. He doesn’t actually like being touched most of the time, but Rhodey had been the only reason he got through the sickening guilt and grief without doing something drastic and damaging to his person.

He thinks he can suck up his aversion to touch, for Loki’s sake. The prince doesn’t move unless Tony moves him, which makes positioning awkward, but he settles them more towards the middle of the bed, still both fully-dressed and atop the blankets. They’re curled up front-to-front; Tony has one hand rubbing lazy circles on the prince’s back, the other hand buried in Loki’s hair, scratching lightly at his scalp. He tucks his chin over the top of Loki’s head and doesn’t mention the shuddering, aborted sobs.

Loki wears himself out eventually. It’s frightening to have the frosty, stubborn prince in his arms like this. He seems… broken. Like someone’s shattered him and left him to sort out the pieces all alone. His heart aches just as much as it flops around nervously behind the reactor. People turn angry and hard and cruel when they’re left alone, with no one to help them recover the abuse life throws at them. Tony doesn’t want to see Loki like that, but he can’t be sure his inexperienced attempts at aid are actually doing anything positive.

Warm, damp puffs of air brush over his collarbone as Loki sleeps, eyes rimmed red, blood streaking his lips and chin. Tony carefully slips away and looks over the prince. He seems so *small*, which isn’t right at all. Pale fingers tighten in his shirt, but Tony gingerly works them free. He folds the blankets around Loki in an attempt to simulate being held, then vanishes out the door.

HE bolts through the halls, bare feet slapping against the flagstone. Vague memories of his hungover visit to- what was her name? Ire? No, *Eir*- guide him, and he just about *skids* into the
palace infirmary. A lady in light blue intercepts him.

“I’m sorry,” she says once Tony explains his rushed arrival. The infirmary is quiet and empty save for a few more women in blue, and possibly a person or two sleeping on a curtained cot. “We have been forbidden from aiding Prince Loki.”

White-hot anger flushes through Tony.

“What the fuck do you mean ‘forbidden’? You’re a doctor, aren’t you? Or a nurse? Where do you get off on refusing to help someone?”

“I wish it were otherwise, but the king-“

“I don’t-!”

“Tony Stark,” interrupts Eir in her brusque, sharp tones. The inventor makes a displeased noise. He doesn’t want to handle the unsettling, intense woman. “Come with me.”

The other, unnamed woman is dismissed, and Eir stares him down until he obeys and walks alongside her.

“Odin has decreed that Loki may receive no aid from any of Asgard. It is said that until Loki learns to stay his tongue, he will be deprived of its use.” She spits the words. “I suppose it is a mercy that he kept his tongue this time.”

Wait, this time? This isn’t the first time Loki’s been tortured like this? And with Odin’s blessing apparently.

“Why? Just… Why did this happen? Why is Odin telling everyone not to help his son?”

“I do not know. All I have been told is that I may not offer help, nor give it if it is sought. Out, out. I must see to Stark,” Eir announces, shooing a pair of women from what seems to be a store room. She closes the door behind them. “Give me your arm.”

Tony isn’t in the business of offering appendages out to people who draw a knife on him, so understandably, he hesitates.

“What?”

“Have faith, Tony Stark. Give me your arm.”

Eir doesn’t actively approach him, even when it’s clear that Tony is flat-out stalling. Tony mulls over his options. Comply and possibly be stabbed by a doctor? OR run the hell away? Hmm, choices choices.

Curiosity wins. Tony offers the underside of one arm. He nearly flinches away again when she brings the knife down, but honestly, what else did he expect? The tip grazes lightly over skin in a two-inch line. It’s barely a cut, more of a deep scratch, but Eir looks satisfied.

“By the nine, you poor dear,” she says, perfectly deadpan. “What a fortunate thing you are not Prince Loki. If you were, I would not be able to give you this.” She browses the shelves and quickly locates a large, opaque jug of oily clear liquid. This she dispenses into a much smaller bottle, bearing a sheath for what appears to be an incredibly-soft, self-cleaning brush. The small bottle is passed on to Tony.
Eir is sly, Tony realizes. She’s not above exploiting loopholes. Tony isn’t Asgardian, therefore Odin’s decree that no one of Asgard may help does not apply to him, and since Tony isn’t Loki, Eir can give him medicine for his brand-new cut. What he does with the liquid after is is own business. Well done, sneaky sneaky. He hold the bottle like a precious gift. Which, he guesses, it is.

“One light coat of the liquid salve, thrice daily. Keep the wound dry for at least a day, but gentle washes with a clean, damp cloth are acceptable. Avoid activities that will stretch or otherwise aggravate the wound. Come to me if you have questions. I will aid you however I can.”

She opens the door and waves him out.

“Thanks. I mean- yeah. Thanks.”

“Thank me by coming back,” she grumbles, thoroughly displeased with him now, though he doesn’t know why. “I have yet to examine the shards in your chest.”

Ah, yes. That. Time to go.

“Uh, I’ll see. So… Bye,” he chirps.

Tony waltzes out of the infirmary, the bottle of liquid salve clutched protectively to his front. The moment he’s out, though, he’s back to running, and to hell with whoever sees him. He needs to get back to Loki.

The prince is awake again when Tony gets back, but he’s just laying there, staring at the wall with hazey green eyes. Tony gets back in bed, wrapping the taller man in his arms. The medicine bottle comes to rest on a table by the bed.

“Hey there, Princess. This okay? I just went out and got something for your lips. Eir’s a sneaky bitch, isn’t she? I think I’m starting to like her.”

This earns him a hum, which is good. A hum is better than pained whines and silence. Tony squirms away again, reaching for the salve. Loki doesn’t resist his departure, but Tony can feel the man’s green, unfocused eyes boring holes into his back.

The oily salve smells kind of like cinnamon when Tony unlatches the cork, and when he settles on his knees beside the bundled prince, he’s met with an expression that catches him off guard. Loki watches him with a kind of hazy awe, which Tony doesn’t understand at all.

“I’m gonna brush this on your lips, okay? I, uh, actually don’t know what it does, but Eir gave it to me, so I think it’ll help.”

Loki lets Tony apply what really just looks like melted neosporin. There’s a feeling of intimacy, running the soft brush over Loki’s barely-parted lips, but Tony focuses on not hurting his friend.

Tony’s getting worried, actually. Loki won’t stop looking at him like he can’t believe he’s lucky enough to have Tony with him, like there’s no one else he wants with him, like he thinks Tony is good. He’s seen that look on himself more times than he can count, usually in the reflection of his face in Pepper’s eyes.

The issue is, Tony’s not good. He’s apparently marvelous at tricking people into thinking he is, but the fact remains: at the end of the day, he’s just a spoiled, self-destructive guy with an ego problem. He regrets deceiving Loki into believing otherwise, because there’s inevitably going to be a falling-out, where Loki realizes he’s been lied to.
That’s for later, though. For now, Tony focuses on nursing Loki, bringing him water, washing the blood from his pale face. They both fall into an exhausted sleep sometime well after midnight, tangled together in mutual support.

JARVIS wakes him up at his usual time. Loki stirs beneath him. Somewhere along the way Loki ended up flat on his back, Tony’s head pillowed on his chest. Their legs intertwine loosely. All in all… not a bad way to wake up, if one ignores the circumstances. Tony props himself up and gestures for JARVIS to silence the alarm.

“Morning, Princess,” the inventor greets.

“Oh really? I hadn’t noticed,” Loki mumbles back. He grimaces, wincing at the pull of the numerous punctures lining his lips.

Tony disentangles from the prince and rolls out of pet. Loki immediately sits up, watching him wander around the room.

“What are you doing?”

“I gotta go help Unnur.” He drops his tunic in favor of pulling on something a little more durable. “I’ll be back in the afternoon.”

All it takes is one glance over to Loki to realize he’s said the wrong thing. The open vulnerability of last night is gone, but there’s still something uneasy and skittish about the usually-unflappable prince. Loki’s throat works as he swallows, suddenly struggling for words. Tony backtracks.

“But you could come with me, you know. Dress up so no one recognizes you, avoid attention. I’m sure Unnur wouldn’t mind a visitor.”

“Why would I need to avoid attention?”

“I mean, if you want to walk around in your full princely glory feel free, but if you don’t want to chat with the inevitable sycophants, disguising yourself sounds like a good way to avoid it.”

Now he’s said the right thing. Loki visibly relaxes, releasing attention Tony hadn’t realized he was holding. There. That’s better.

“Will this do?”

If Tony hadn’t watched the transformation, he wouldn’t have been able to recognize Loki. The prince’s appearance shifts and morphs. Black hair goes sandy-brown, curly to ruler-straight. His feline face rounds out, and his nose kind of hooks hawkishly downward. His eyes stay that gorgeous green, but everything else from head to toe, including height, changes.

Still, there’s something Tony can’t pin, something undeniably Loki.

“Fucking awesome, Princess.”

Loki applies the liquid salve himself this time, slapping away Tony’s hands when he tries to help. They leave as soon as Loki changes clothes. This little delay means they’re a bit late, but Unnur isn’t too pissed. She’s more confused.

“Is this the guy you’re always talking about?”

Oh, that bitch. Unnur’s eyes twinkle in playful mirth, but he can see the query there too. Tony
flicks his gaze to Loki, and he sees one bushy brown brow cocked as if to say 'Oh? Go on?'

“Yeah, uh, yep. He’s hanging out with us today. That’s all we need to talk about. So what’s on the agenda today?”

More hinges. What fun.

Loki sits at the table and amuses himself with what seems to be solitaire with round cards, though after he explains what he means by ‘solitaire’ he’s firmly informed that no, it isn’t solitaire.

It’s totally solitaire.

However, when Tony looks over around noon, he sees Loki conked out, head on the table. Ah. There’s that emotional exhaustion rearing its ugly head again.

“So what’s his story?” Unnur finally pipes up. She’s been dying to interrogate Tony all day. She wipes off her hands and gestures to Loki- Lucin, according to what they’ve told her. “Why bring him today? A little warning would have been nice. Could have picked up a little.”

“There was an issue at home,” Tony allows carefully. “It’s not exactly my story to tell, but he didn’t want to be alone, so he came with me.”

There. That’s vague enough that Unnur probably won’t figure out there’s a prince drooling on her table.

“Does it have anything to do with the…” She runs her thumb over her own lips. Ah. Loki hadn’t been able to magic away the punctures, so they’re still obvious. The salve helped with the inflammation, though, so he no longer looks like he ate a bee.

“Again, not my place to say, sweetheart.”

“It’s kinda telling though, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

The wounds? Well, yeah. It wouldn’t take much to figure out that they were deliberately inflicted, but Tony doesn’t see what she’s getting at.

“That he came to you.”

“I mean, yeah. He’s my friend. Course he came to me.”

“Yeah, but… Why not his parents? A sibling? A doctor? Another friend? Why not lick his wounds in private?”

Tony is silent, watching the rise and fall of Loki’s back as he sleeps.

“He trusts me, I guess.”

Chapter End Notes

I intended to incorporate a few more things into this chapter, but it got out of hand and I felt it best to focus on the aftermath of the mouth-sewing incident.
As always, Kudos and Comments are my life's blood, my cup of tea, the jam to my buttered toast. Love you people!
Here it is, a few days early!

I’m making Dave and her family very sociable for a reason, but don’t try to interact with wild birds. If you see a baby, put it back in its nest or call animal control or a wildlife rehab center. Do not try to raise it on your own. If a young bird approaches you and doesn’t seem afraid of you, call a rehab center or search google to see what you should do. A crow or other wild bird that is comfortable with humans is not fit to survive in the wild and may need rehabilitation.

Also, keep your eyes peeled for my Beauty and the Beast adaptation. I’ve got the prelude up right now, but a full-length story should follow within the next couple of months.

Loki wakes up before long, with much sharper eyes. He lifts his head, a card stuck to his cheek, and Tony ducks his head, hiding a grin. He can feel green eyes on his shoulders, as he brings the hammer down on shining metal. He’s filled out, more muscle than fat now that he’s not lazing around with his head shoved deep in a bottle. He maybe flaunts a little, rolling his shoulders and rocking into the downswing perhaps more than he needs. Unnur meets Tony’s eyes and rolls her own. He sticks his tongue out at her in a flagrant display of immaturity. She responds across from him by poking out her own tongue, this between two spread fingers pressed to her lips. Loki huffs a laugh behind Tony.

They go home together, walking shoulder to shoulder. The moment they into Dave’s garden, the disguise melts away, leaving Loki standing tall and secure, with a frosty sort of caution about him. As an afterthought, he magics the illusion of gold wire through his lips, although he explains it isn’t really there, once Tony expresses his distress. The issue is, though, that is anyone finds out Tony cut Loki free, they might try to thread more wire through inflamed skin.

They hole up in Tony’s room and practice magic, after brushing the prince’s lips with salve again. Loki doesn’t speak unless he must, but they make progress. The prince is showing him runes now, explaining without words how a scratched out or inlaid symbol can render magic easier to grasp. Not always practical, but good for work you want to last a long time. Tony wonders, naturally, if these runes are all he can use, or if he can make his own?

Tony thinks he can make his own. He’ll practice later.

Loki sleeps wrapped in his arms again. Neither of them so much as hint at sending Loki back to fester in his memories, alone and lonely and hurting. Tony has so much goddamn red in his ledger. He’s not going to add abandoning his friend to the list of moral debts.

Falling asleep with his chest pressed to Loki’s back is easy. It’s sleeping that’s the hard part.

He dreams of burning sand and the screech of a plane tearing itself to pieces. He dreams of heart failure, of his glowing soul crushed in Obie’s hand. He dreams of a broken, lifeless body falling
from metal hands. He dreams, he dreams, he *dreams*.

He is utterly still when he wakes, heart pounding and bile in his throat. He stares at the ceiling, nails threatening to tear holes in the sheets with how tightly he grips them. He swallows, gasps, blinks. A soft weight settles on his chest. Tony buries his fingers in black curls.

“Your heart beats so rapidly,” Loki murmurs sleepily, smoothing a hand over Tony’s shoulder. The inventor can’t find his words, but Loki doesn’t seem to mind. He remains with his ear pressed above the arc reactor, and for once Tony can’t bring himself to mind that someone’s so close. He trusts Loki, enough that he doesn’t seize up in fear that the reactor’s about to be ripped away.

“You’re safe, Tony. It’s alright. I’ll protect you.”

Tony wants to laugh, but he swallows thickly again, trying to choke away the lump in his throat. Shouldn’t he be the one protecting Loki? After all, *Tony* isn’t the one who just got home from a torture session. He closes his eyes and scratches his nails lightly against Loki’s scalp. The prince hums at the touch, and without abandoning his living pillow he glides a hand up Tony’s neck, to cup his jaw and blindly stroke his thumb over the inventor’s cheek.

Loki soothes away the panic, gentles the fear, and gives him a steady point of reference to focus on. Tony doesn’t go back to sleep, but he dozes, ever-aware of the body sprawled atop his, the hand that fell limp beside his head. Loki does sleep, and though he shifts every now and then, he remains draped across his living pillow. Tony ends up with hair in his mouth, and though it’s distasteful, he doesn’t dare move for fear of waking his companion. His heart still beats a rapid staccato, but now… Well, it isn’t exactly in fear, is it?

Just as before, the pair of them rise before the sun. Loki dons his disguise and tags along as Tony goes to work. Unnur again doesn’t mind, but she gives ‘Lucin’ something to do. If he’s going to be loitering around, he might as well make himself useful, she announces. And so a prince of Asgard finds himself cleaning, starting with the two glass windows. Tony watches in delight as Loki undertakes his task in good grace. It’s hilarious. He’s almost tempted to tell Unnur who it is she’s bossing around.

“What the fuck are *you* smiling about, huh?” she grumbles.

“Nothing, nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

Loki ends up with nearly as much soot on him as Tony does, just by virtue of smoke from the forge. A good fire doesn’t smoke much, but ash is unavoidable at the best of times, and Unnur can’t afford the best charcoal.

They putter home together again. Loki buys them each a cup of some sort of spiced warm juice, which Tony finds cloyingly sweet but drinks anyways. Loki also asks to linger in the garden, citing a desire to play with the birds.

“What’s up with you and the crows, anyways?” Tony asks, Dave’s body held up by his hand. Her legs dangle sedately, and she amuses herself by running her beak through the sparse hair of his arms- grooming him, Loki says.

“I find them charming,” is the simple reply, as the prince tries to coax a pair of full-grown birds from the trees. Like the true disney princess he is, he succeeds and finds himself with an armful of crow as the older birds settle comfortably on him. “Very intelligent, loyal, cuddlesome. What’s not to like about them?”

He scratches his fingers beneath the feathers of one bird’s neck, and the crow makes its demon-
rumble purr. Dave stabs at his wrist with her beak, demanding similar treatment as Loki wanders off to stand by the tiled pool.

“Demanding,” he chides, but he gives in, and her feathers puff up the moment finger meets head.

Loki murmurs gently to the birds, and Tony watches fondly. Loki trusts him. And he... He trusts Loki. Trust isn’t a thing Tony gives, not anymore. So how did Loki manage to slip up beneath his ribs and wind around his heart without Tony noticing until it was far too late? He looks down at Dave, who has him fixed within one beady eye. The streak of white above her eye looks remarkably like a cocked eyebrow.

“Don’t look at me like that. What do you know about people-relationships? You’re a fucking bird.”

Racing footsteps on flagstone lift Tony’s eyes from his handful of crow. In a flurry of gold and brown fabric and curly red hair, Frigga bursts into the garden, attendants flocking after her. She charges straight for her son, scattering the gathered crows. Tony freezes, eyes flicking between mother and son.

“Loki? Loki, Loki, I’m so sorry,” she whispers, taking his his face between her hands. Loki looks startled, bewildered, but as Frigga continues to fuss, he stands perfectly still, and perfectly silent. The thread illusion is firmly back in place.

“My queen, surely it would be prudent to change from your riding clothes,” one attendant argue. “No. Out, all of you, leave. Fetch me something with which to cut these threads.”

A chorus of protest rises up, and Tony strides closer.

“The Allfather has forbidden-”

“I do not care what my husband has forbidden. Bring me-”

“Frigga,” Tony says quietly, touching her shoulder. She turns her wild, teary eyes on Tony. He leans close and whispers, too softly for the few attendants to hear. “It’s an illusion. He’s already lost the wire.”

“What?”

Her voice is small, so small. She sounds so much younger than a queen really ought to sound, and while Tony didn’t think it was possible, he’s even more glad he cut Loki free. Asgard is a cruel place, from what he’s seen, and Frigga seems too merciful to belong. She holds a compassion in her heart that few others in this gilded palace possess.

Tony doesn’t repeat what he said, and Loki remains dutifully silent, but Frigga nods. She composes herself and lets her hands drop from Loki’s face, folding them before herself.

“Very well. I will obey the Allfather.” Her voice is cold now, as cold as ice. “My order still stands. Leave. I will call if I have need.”

With a display of bowing and scraping, the flock of attendants vanishes. Frigga buckles, pulling Loki down to the ground with her. She cradles his head to her chest as Tony stands guard.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” she chokes, petting her fingers through Loki’s curls. “I should have been here for you. I didn’t know. I should have known.”
“It’s alright, Mother. Don’t cry for me.” Loki’s back is stiff, and his hands are limp at his sides. Then, he speaks again, his words strangled. “Where were you?”

Frigga buries her face in his hair, clutching her son tightly. Tony feels distinctly uncomfortable, like he’s intruding on something very private. He takes a step back, but Frigga glances up at him, shaking her head minutely, before she returns to her son.

“I was sent away, to judge the wellfare of Asgard’s outer reaches. Word did not reach me of your misfortune until last night. I set out immediately. Loki, I didn’t know. I thought- I thought your father would protect you.”

“He is king first, and father second,” Loki spits bitterly. “I should have held my tongue. My folly nearly cost us our alliance with the dwarves.”

“And his callousness nearly cost you your life. This isn’t your fault, love. You were challenged to a game, and it was just that: a game. How were you to know where their invisible boundary lay? How could they justify what they have done? Odin’s first loyalty must be to his family. The fault does not lay with you but with him. Tony, come here.”

He startles, as Frigga waves him down. Tony awkwardly gets down on his knees, and Frigga extends her arms to include him in the hug.

“My boys,” she says softly, pressing a kiss to Tony’s head, then Loki’s. “Tony, you cut the wire?”

“Yeah, of course.”

And what else is there to say? Tony can’t bring himself to posture or brag. He did the human thing, the only thing he could do.

“Then you have my thanks. You are as much my son as Loki; I do not know what we would do without you.”

“Mother,” Loki huffs, mortified by the display, but Tony can feel him settling into the hug. He himself is silent, a mess of unidentified emotion. Tony doesn’t know what to do with this, doesn’t know what to do with her trust, her declaration that she thinks of him as a son, after so little time. He doesn’t speak.

Frigga releases them eventually, though her face is wet when she does so. She brushes Tony’s hair from his face, and gives Loki the same treatment.

“I will speak to the Allfather. I hope to have this mess sorted out in all haste, but until then… take care of eachother. Please.”

“Of course.”

“Yeah, ‘course.”

She tears herself away from them, leaving Loki and Tony sitting by the pool. She wipes under her eyes and casts a spell masking her frazzled appearance, before squaring her shoulders and marching off, prepared to do battle.

“She’s something, huh? Reminds me of an old friend of mine,” Tony remarks weakly, still leaning into Loki’s side. The prince doesn’t respond. His hands rub together in that worrisome way that makes Tony think he’s going to rip the skin of his palm. He takes Loki by the hand, twining their fingers together to prevent that eventuality. Loki looks down at their joined hands. Suddenly
conscious that he’d touched without asking permission, Tony withdrew and pushed to his feet. “C’mon. We’re both covered in ash and your mom’s on a warpath. Let’s go clean up and watch the show.”

In the end, they aren’t privy to the shouting match of epic proportions happening in Odin’s throne room. Guards stationed at the door and every open archway won’t let them linger. More’s the pity. Raised voices carry even through thick doors, although somehow sound is blocked from coming through the arches.

They have to give up. The unruly tangle of nameless emotion has more or less resolved itself to something as of yet unidentified, but not unpleasant. He feels… light. Happy, almost. He doesn’t trust it.

Tony gets to pick the directions they wander, and he takes them up and up and up, to a high, high tower. He’s still not sure how all these open windows and arches don’t create killer wind tunnels, but he’s happy to take advantage and lean against a sunbathed wall, looking out over the sea.

“Where does the water go?” he asks. “It looks like it just falls off into space.”

“It does, in a way. What you see now is the edge of Asgard. Water washes over the edge and drifts into emptiness, but the magic of this realm catches it, draws it back in. It rises to mountains springs, and once again begins its journey to the edge of the world.”

“So it’s fresh water?”

“Yes.”

Loki stands beside him, looking out. The sky beyond the water is full of stars. Blackness speckled silver. It’s strange to compare it with the blue skies directly ahead.

“I’m coming with you, next time you leave.” This earns him a cautious, speculative glance.

“Why?”

“To keep you out of trouble. And to see the stars. On Earth, we were barely starting to consider exploring the other planets around the sun. You guys can transport somewhere with a fancy flash of light.” Tony scratches his chin. “I was destined to stay on Earth, I guess. Never was part of the space program, never considered joining. I wanted to be an astronaut for a week, when I was a kid, but otherwise? I was going to stay on the planet I was born on. Now I’m here. I want to see everything.”

“Then you shall. I would have you by my side always.”

Their shoulders brush together as Loki settles beside him. It feels right, like they were meant to slot side by side. *Fuck,* he’d been an idiot, hadn’t he? Too scared to face rejection, he’d nearly tossed away one of the first and few meaningful relationships he’d had in *years.* He hadn’t noticed how much he missed this stuck-up prince until a month of separation and a horrible crime had brought them together again.

“We are friends, yes?”

Tony looks over at his companion, brown eyes meeting green. Loki watches him with the unblinking intensity of a snake.

“Yeah, of course.”
“I see. And do friends often kiss each other?”

Ice washes down his back. Why now? Why bring this up here, in a moment of peace? Tony closes his eyes, sighing a dead man’s breath.

“I mean, sometimes. I already apologized, Loki. I don’t know what else to do. Tell me what to do.”

When he dares look at Loki again, the prince’s thin, scab-studded lips lift at one corner. Tony can’t for the life of him figure out why Loki’s smiling, of all things.

“Do you regret kissing me? Be honest, Stark. Lies between us now would spoil the whole affair.”

What affair? Tony isn’t used to being blindsided, especially not in a positive way.

“I regret doing it without your permission.” The words come like pulled teeth, uncomfortable and promising blood.

“I see.” Two steps of those long, long legs bring Loki to crowd up against Stark, his hands coming to rest comfortably on Tony’s hips. The whole thing gives Tony a sort of emotional whiplash. What? Why? Why this? Why him? He stands frozen, heart hammering away behind the reactor. He feels the prince’s breath on his mouth. “And if I were to give you my permission now?”

Oh. Oh. He’s an idiot isn’t he? So much for ‘genius’, huh? Who would’ve thought that Tony Stark would be pining away while someone else was pining right back? Tony smirks, tilting his head up. Their lips are a hair’s breadth apart. Loki’s lips part in a silent sigh.

“I wouldn’t kiss you.” Loki deflates, drawing back just slightly though his hands linger. He shutters himself, hurt blossoming and vanishing as quickly as it comes. Tony lifts a hand and soothes it over the nape of his friend’s neck. “But only because Eir said not to mess with your mouth until it healed up, got it?”

Something smoldering bursts to starry life in Loki’s eyes.

“And if I were to say Eir be damned?”

Where his first assault was ash, this touch of lips is a flame.

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Later, when they tangle together in the fading sunlight, the ocean breeze dancing over their skin, Tony feels again that rare sense of peace.

Chapter End Notes

As always, comments and Kudos are life. Please leave a comment, even if it's just to say 'I love it!', and extend the same courtesy to other authors as well. This is the one time when it's okay to pay someone in feedback and experience!

This is now officially the length of a novella!
Twenty Two

Thank you for bearing with me! I'm taking my last final for the semester tomorrow, so hopefully I'll have a nice, relaxing break to do some writing and get some chapters done afterwards.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Life is… good. Surprisingly. It’s completely different from life in New York or Malibu or anywhere else on Earth, but it’s good, all things considered. He misses his bots, but otherwise? He’d already mourned and buried anyone he cared about by the time New York bit the dust.

That doesn’t mean everything is perfect, because it’s not. Tony still has nightmares every now and then, still freezes consumed by guilt that he wasn’t able to stop the nuke, that so many people died in an instant. Now, however, he has a bed to crawl into when he doesn’t want to feel alone. Tony doesn’t know what to do with the casual affection Loki bestows upon them, the fingers in his hair, the kisses when no one watches, the playful gropes. Loki asks permission first, which is… unexpected. No one really asks permission to do social touching. You want to get your friend’s attention? Touch their elbow. Want to show someone you care? Hug. Feeling playful? Give them a nudge.

It doesn’t work for Tony. He’s been touched without permission by too many people who did so for the sake of hurting him to be comfortable with contact. But that makes him touch starved. It’s a vicious cycle of avoidance and craving, but Loki is… Safe. His hands are cool and soft, and they don’t make his skin crawl the way touch usually does. Loki’s hand on his shoulder or curved against his hip doesn’t cause his skin to feel two sizes too small. It’s comforting and pleasant, and Tony finds himself leaning into Loki whenever the opportunity arises.

Frigga bullies Odin into lifting Loki’s punishment, so he can finally walk around without the illusion of wire through his lips, but the palace is divided. A small faction remains appalled by Loki’s treatment. The rest think it justified, and believe Odin’s decision to let his son endure torture was a wise one. Tony wants to rant and rail against the injustice of the situation, of the casual cruelty Loki endures, but what can he do? He’s one man, and if the queen of space-viking-land can’t prevent something like this from happening, what can he do?

For one, extracting that promise from Loki to take Tony along on his adventures is a start. Sticking to Loki like they’re joined at the hip is another way.

Loki keeps coming with him to Unnur’s shop, disguised as Lucin the layabout. Tony is absolutely certain that a prince has better things to do than loaf around watching his sometimes-bedwarmer walk get himself covered in sweat and soot, so he assumes Loki still feels fragile, still needs the presence of a friend to ground himself with. Tony was the first and only person to help with the wire. That must be why Loki seems to associate Tony with stability (hah. Tony Stark, stable).

A little over a week passes after Odin lifts Loki’s punishment, Unnur finds herself in jeopardy.

Tony arrives at her forge with Loki in tow, but the fire is cold, and three men loom over Unnur where she stands straight-backed and defiant, backed into a corner.
“What’s going on here?” Tony asks without preamble, beelining straight for his mentor. When the shorter of the men tries to block him, he snaps, “Hey, back off, buddy.”

“Who is this, sweetheart?” one of the taller men purrs. “Do you need a man to carry your little ‘business’?”

“He’s my apprentice, Fjor. He works for me, not the other way around,” Unnur growls.

“An apprentice. Cute. You are just a girl, Unnur. How can you expect to be the master of anyone? Look, your father sends his love. He reminds you that you may come home at any time. Surely you’ve learned that no one does business with a woman when a man is much more reliable. Look at this place!” Tall, pale, and condescending gestures around with a sweeping arm, and Tony ducks under it and stands behind Unner, at her shoulder. Loki lingers in the doorway, green sparking at his fingers as he watches and waits.

“I have a year,” Unnur hisses, fists clenching. “I still have a year. You may tell Sorensen that I don’t need his lackeys breathing down my neck. We made a deal.”

“How do you expect the next year will go, hmm? Are you going to lure in commissions with your pretty little quim?” Unnur stiffens, a strangled hiss of rage escaping her. “It would be better used producing sons for your future husband. Come home, Unnur. Your father misses you.”

“How dare-”

“Actually fellas, she’s already been contracted by Loki.” Green eyes snap to him, an incredulous look washing over ‘Lucin’s face. “You know, Prince Loki?”

All eyes are on him now. He prays to whoever’s listening that neither Unnur nor Loki speak up to disagree. He gets the feeling these three gentlemen could pound his face in if they catch him lying.

“Yeah. He stumbled in here a few weeks ago, saw some of her knives. He asked for a set of throwing knives.” That seems Loki-ish, right? Throwing knives? Does Loki throw knives?

Unnur joins in the bullshit, stepping forward. She presses a finger into Fjor’s chest, leaning up glare at him.

“You wanna talk success? I’d say having a fucking prince commission me out of the blue counts. Piss off and let me get to work. I’ve got knives to make.”

Fjor stares down at her with cold, murky blue eyes. A smirk splits his lips.

“How strange. Your father was also recently commissioned to craft new knives for the prince. I wonder why. I look forward to seeing your finished product. Perhaps the prince will deign to show us your work when we deliver our knives. Until then, Unnur.”

Of course the bastard gets the last word in. The trio slinks out past Loki. The prince in disguise has eyes only for Tony, and to be perfectly honest he doesn’t look impressed. Which is understandable. But Tony panicked, alright? He doesn’t know what the hell a ‘quim’ is, but it sounded unpleasant and he was getting some very unsettling vibes from that Fjor guy, so he spouted off the first thing that came to mind.

Unnur stands where she is, rhythmically clenching and unclenching her fists, before she whirls around and shoves her way into Tony’s personal space.

“Are you crazy?” she hisses, eyes wide. “The most contact I’ve ever had with Prince Loki is when
I accidentally stole his pet snake! How am I supposed to beg a commission from him? Tony, I’m screwed.”

Loki signs, rapping his knuckles on the door frame. Unnur glances over to him, and she freezes as Lucin’s form melts away to reveal Loki in all his glory. Tony even swears he summons a breeze to flutter his cape. The fucking drama queen. Tony can’t help but grin.

“I suppose I could help with that,” Loki drawls, leaning in the doorway. He shoots a look at Tony that very clearly says ‘you’re in trouble’, but Tony blows him a cheeky kiss. It probably won’t help his case later, but hey, Tony Stark isn’t big on the whole self-preservation thing.


“Take your time. I know I can be intimidating.”

“Ass,” Tony snips.

“You like my ass,” Loki snips right back.

“Wait, Tony- Him? Him? You now what?” She takes a deep breath, rubbing her forehead. “You’re going to buy me the biggest, stickiest honey cake you can find. And you.” She points to the prince. “Would you like to take a seat? Apparently we have knives to discuss.”

Tony is sent out on his mission, and oh dear. What an awful punishment. Sent to find baked sticky buns. He returns with a little paper basket of massive honey-soaked sweet buns. Some of them have cherries in them. Does Unnur like cherries? He doesn’t know. Tony definitely likes cherries.

Unnur has a sheaf of paper spread out on her hastily-cleared table, and she sketches with quick, clean sweeps of ink, talking quickly and with eager excitement. Loki contemplates the designs forming on the paper, but Tony doesn’t feel at all remorseful about distracting the pair with his bounty.

Before they leave, Loki reaches into the pouch strapped to his hip and withdraws two round, silvery coins. Unnur’s jaw drops as they’re set on the table. She stares at them, chewing on her cheek, but she shakes her head.

“I can’t take this. The knives will cost a fraction of that.”

“You are mistaken. This is a fraction of what the knives will cost. Provide me seven excellent blades, and I will provide you seven more plats. I will come for them in three week’s time.”

Loki flicks his hand, gesturing Tony along like a dog as he strides out, giving Unnur no time to argue. Tony grins at Unnur, stealing a honey cake as he follows his friend away. She’s going to kill him tomorrow, for bringing a prince to her humble workshop without offering warning, but for now, things are looking up.

“I’m kinda surprised you actually went along with it,” Tony mumbles around a mouthful of doughy goodness. “You don’t like her much.”

“We spoke of her ‘deal’ with her father,” Loki offers in way of brusque explanation. “I understand her displeasure with her treatment at his hands. I would not have her return to his grasp when I can help otherwise.”

Oh. Okay. That’s a little more touchy-feely than Tony expected.
“Cool.”

Ladies and gentlemen, Tony Stark, master of words.

Tony does, in fact, end up in quite a bit of trouble for volunteering Loki without his permission, but it’s not all that bad.

Over the next two weeks, business picks up. Even though Loki refuses to come with Tony to Unnur’s forge now that she knows his identity, word gets around that this nobody smith in her tiny workshop has the patronage of a prince. People are curious. They trickle in, their eyes full of judgment, but… they actually buy things. Unnur creates a waiting list, not because she is just overflowing with patrons, but because she’s only one person, with one apprentice. There’s only so much she can do.

There’s talk of a new location, a larger forge, with an actual separate area for living. Tony tags along with Unnur to check out a potential spot, mainly because Unnur is convinced she’ll be given a fairer price if she has a man with her. They walk to four different places over the course of a day, and on impulse, Unnur runs back and slaps down the two coins Loki gave her as well as a handful of smaller coins on the table of the second place they saw. The coins are accepted, and just like that, Unnur has a new forge.

The next few days are spent moving her meager belongings and extensive supplies, and the first fire she lights in the round stone forge set into the wall of the covered outdoor area brings an eager, excited grin to her face.

Nothing is created that day. Instead, Unnur focuses on bringing the coals up to temperature while she has Tony organizing the tools and materials needed to complete her jobs over the coming weeks. There are metals to purchase, leather works to commission, just… so much to do.

Another week passes, and Tony arrives to find another woman sitting with Unnur, talking quietly. Her name, he learns, is Astrid, and she has nowhere to go after being abandoned by both her family and lover for an unplanned pregnancy. She’s a blessing, though, possessing unexpected leatherworking skill and an affinity for basic magic. Rolf arrives not long after, cast out once his affair with his mentor’s son came to light. He becomes Unnur’s second apprentice, and while he isn’t as quick a study as Tony, his skills are apparent.

Watching things fall into place for Unnur is… it’s good. Very, very good. Sure, he had a part in it, but he knows Unnur’s skills, her passion, her drive. He knows she has a good heart. He may have helped by shoving Loki her way, but she’s the one who actually has the skills to pay the bills.

She sends him to the palace- “I can’t believe you live in the fucking palace”- with finished knives, all seven of them. Astrid crafted a wrap-around thigh band with six sheaths on it, and the extra seventh knife has its own black leather sheath. Tony doesn’t know anything about throwing knives, but he assumes these are pretty good.

Dave demands attention when he passes through the garden, but for once she actually stays on his shoulder when he walks inside, and no amount of prying and shooring can get her to let go. Tony resigns himself to walking through the palace with a crow tugging at his hair and rasping a demonic purr in his ear. Someone whose name he doesn’t know and doesn’t really care to know takes him to Frigga’s weaving room, where she and Loki stand on the balcony talking with their heads close together. Tony clears his throat, drawing their attention.

“Hey, uh, Unnur sent these.” He lifts the rolled-up leather, and Loki parts from his mother to accept the rolled-up knives. He unfurls the black leather and takes one of the knives in hand, eyeing
it critically. Tony takes a step back as Loki twirls the knife between his fingers, flipping it up in the air without a care. The prince locks his eyes on one of the balcony pillars, an appraising look in his expression.

“I know what you are thinking, my son,” Frigga chides, gliding in. “Don’t you dare throw knives in here.”

“How else am I to test the spin?” Loki argues, though he slides the knife back in its sheath.

“How are you, Tony?” Frigga turns her attention on him, and just as always, it feels like a sudden sunbeam on a cloudy day.

“Good, good. I just, uh, finished up work. We’ve got two new people, actually. Unnur finally has a magic-worker to help her out, and there’s this new smith, Rolf. He had to leave his last apprenticeship, but he’s actually really good.”

“Does this mean you will have more time to yourself, now that you are no longer the sole aid?”

Tony scratches his fuzzy jaw, shrugging.

“I guess so. Why?”

Loki tucks the rolled-up sheath of knives under one arm, and gingerly takes Tony’s hand. There’s plenty of time for Tony to pull away, but he doesn’t feel the need to, not now.

“There is something we want to show you,” he murmurs.

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Something, as it turns out, is a big, rectangular room in one of the middle-height towers making up the curved triangle of the palace. Just like almost every other room, one wall doesn’t even count as a wall, open to the air and overlooking the water. Although, what look to be membranous dividers are folded up into the pillars. They’ll probably pullable, used to shut the room from the empty sky.

A wide, round fire pit - built up maybe waist-height from the ground, suspended by stone pillars with nothing beneath it - takes up the center of the room, crackling with blue flames. Tony can’t figure out what the fire is burning, until Frigga explains it’s fueled by magic. There are tables pushed up against the wall, just waiting to be rearranged, and the wall opposite the open view of the city holds shelves, already containing Tony’s tools.

“What is this?” Tony asks cautiously, running his fingers over the black walls of the fire pit. The fire is obviously incredibly hot, but that heat somehow remains contained.

“A workshop,” Loki replies, watching with his mother from the doorway. “Your workshop. I think it’s time to put your suit somewhere other than your bedroom floor.”

“I thought you liked having my suit on the floor,” Tony drawls, just to see the flush color Loki’s face in blotches, but the innuendo comes out distracted. There’s an uncomfortable tight feeling in his chest that’s completely unrelated to the reactor. A workshop. A space of his own. A place to- to- to do what he does best. To build. To create. “Here, look at this.”

Loki steps into the space and guides Tony with a light touch on his elbow. In the center of the wall across from the door, an ornate circle of gold is set into the wall. At even intervals around the circle, what looks to be a total of four colorful monkey-things (they aren’t monkeys. Tony doesn’t know what they are, but they sure as hell aren’t monkeys) cling to the circle. One is orange, another pink, yet another blue, and the last is red. Swirly gold lines are set from the center of the
circle to each of the monkeys, and Loki touches where the lines meet.

The monkeys peel away from the wall bit by bit, making the startling shift from 2D to 3D. One by one they clamber onto Loki’s arm and down his back, leaping to the floor to skitter around, chittering excitedly. Tony watches in bemusement. Loki seems utterly put-out.

“I’m guessing you had a little more of a badass introduction in mind,” Tony remarks drily as they watch the pink one jump on the blue one, the two of them rolling around screeching.

“Perhaps,” Loki sniffs.

“What are they?” The orange one scales Tony’s leg and clambers onto his shoulder. Its fingers bury in his hair, tugging on the brown strands. Tony can’t help a grin, reaching up to bat the monkey’s hands away.

“Constructs, like your JARVIS, but with physical form. They are intended to provide aid in your working.”

“Huh. And you made them?” When Loki hums his affirmation, Tony can’t resist teasing, “We’ve only slept together like, three times, and you’re already saying we’ve got kids? Can’t say I expected this, but I’ll do my best.”

Loki chokes on air, and Tony laughs out loud, grabbing the orange monkey off of his shoulder.

“They aren’t- They aren’t children,” Loki protests. They’re alone now. Frigga quietly made her exit not long ago. “They are workshop aids.”

“Whatever you say, babe.” He hold the orange monkey up in front of him. “You’re gonna be Clyde.”

One by one, Tony names the scrambling monkeys. The red one is Blinky, the pink one is Pinky, and the blue one is Inky. He even manages to get them to line up with some coaxing. Pinky picks its nose, which okay, ew. Tony rolls his eyes. They’re no better than Dum-E, and that thought sends a pang through his heart. Great. Now he’s associating the monkeys with his bots.

Loki shows him how to put the monkeys back into their mural form, and Tony really can’t resist grabbing Loki’s face, tugging the Asgardian down to steal a long, slow kiss.

“This is perfect, Lo. I’m gonna make some awesome shit, just you wait.”

“I have faith in you,” Loki agrees. A cloud crosses over his face, and Loki pulls away, crossing his arms petulantly. “But they are not my children. My children are far more noble.”

That sends Tony into another fit of laughter.

Chapter End Notes

So just FYI… This is going to be a 4-part series. Just a little tidbit for you. Here are the names of the parts: End of the World (as we know it), A Whole New World, Worlds Apart, End of the World. I’m in this for the long haul.
Kudos warm my heart, and I treasure every comment :)


Twenty Three

Chapter Notes

Believe it or not, I actually intended to add three more events to this chapter, but the introduction of a certain character kind of took center stage. I was super excited to bring him in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony has a workshop. He has a workshop now. And he has the backing of a prince, and the queen. He knows what people call him. Prince Loki’s courtesan-Smith. And while courtesan might be kind of an outdated term where he comes from, Tony knows what that means. It’s fine, though. No one says it to his face, or Loki’s for that matter. It makes sense, if you think about it. Grungy, scruffy man comes out of nowhere, nearly gets executed, and then immediately gains the favor of the younger prince? High-class prostitute is an easy explanation.

It’s all just talk, though. The general populace, from what Loki delights in telling him between kisses, has nothing to go on, no fuel for their homophobic rumors. When they share a bed, to all appearances they actually go to their separate rooms. However, both Loki and Tony know better. Most nights Loki either teleports- teleports. How awesome is that? to Tony’s room, or he sends an illusory look-alike to his room and hides his presence until he and Tony are safely behind closed doors. It’s a secret, albeit a well-known one. Tony thinks it’s kind of fun, actually.

So long as he ignores the niggling doubtful voice saying that that’s all he is. A whore. That Loki’s just stringing him along, bribing him with tools and materials and a place to stay. He’s technically a kept man.

But Tony thinks he and Loki have something… interesting going on. They’re friends. Friends with benefits. That’s it.

That’s what he tells himself. It sounds kinda weak to his own ears.

But he’s not a ‘courtesan’.

He knows that.

And besides. Nothing is going to take away from his excitement at having a workshop.

Unnur has Rolf and Astrid now. She doesn’t need him every single day. Tony negotiates a bargain. Three days out of the week he comes to work for her and learn from her. He comes to do odd jobs and finishing work and to get his hands dirty hammering cherry-red metal. And that’s all well and good. On at least one of those days Unnur gets to go see her pen-pal in Idunn’s garden.

The other four days...

Well.

He guts the armor, using his brand-new, fully-stocked workshop to take it apart, down to the rivets and gaskets. Loki comes to watch him work sometimes, when he’s not occupied by his ‘princely duties’. He gets a front-row view to the careful, meticulous assembly of Tony’s pride and joy. He
even helps out, changing the colors of the metal panels he forms to match the suit’s color scheme.

Clyde turns out to be top-dog in the little pack of monkeys, but all in all, the crazy little constructs end up helpful, of all things. It turns out that they don’t feel heat, so he can have Inky and Blinky hold blistering expanses of metal in place while he works on shaping the sheets into working parts (they’re the ones that can stay still the longest without fidgeting).

He gets a month. A glorious, busy month, and the suit is almost completely finished. It’s still based on electricity, because hey, he wants the suit up and running before he actually tries building Mark III B with veins rather than copper wires. There are just tests to perform. He doesn’t let Loki watch the preliminaries taking place in the privacy of the workshop, instead choosing to make his friend wait for the Big Reveal.

But still. A month. A month, before Loki comes and grabs him, orders him to tell Unnur that he won’t be able to come by for at least a week. Loki’s being an ass, and- well. He’s doing exactly what Tony did to him, isn’t he? Denying him concrete answers in order to build suspense towards a Big Reveal. That makes Tony an ass too, doesn’t it.

He can live with that.

Loki, apparently an Asgardian boyscout, is fully prepared for the journey. There are horses (fuck. He rode a horse maybe once. Maybe. If his terrified clinging even counted as riding.) already saddled and waiting at the mouth of the opal bridge, and Loki just about thrums with excited energy, but he still won’t say a word about where they’re going. Not even a little clue, a tiny hint. Nothing.

Tony needs help getting up on the horse. This isn’t exactly his strong suit, okay? It doesn’t help that the big, spotty-grey animal looks like it could bite his hand off in one massive chomp. Loki laughs at him when he says as much.

“They’re herbivores, Tony. Horses eat plants, not hands.”

“No, I’m pretty sure we’ve got stories on earth about irish horses that eat people.”

Loki shakes his head in wonder and mounts his own silky black horse in one fluid motion. Tony clutches the saddle rather than the reins, which he technically knows is a big no-no, but the horse seems content to follow Loki’s behemoth, their hooves clattering against the shimmering bridge.

Though he keeps a white-knuckled grip on the saddle, Tony can’t help but lean over as they traverse the bridge to the golden ornament-thing. He watches the water, until he sees- ah! There. That’s what he’s looking for. The edge where water falls off into space in a smooth, glassy curtain. He twists around to keep it in his sight after they pass, but then space itself catches his attention.

Away from the city, the sky is black and starry. Which doesn’t make sense. They’re, like, two football fields away from Asgard, and yet the sky is no longer blue. It’s inky black, spattered with stars and shimmering, misty fields like galaxies in the dark. Tony’s jaw drops. Never has he seen the stars as clearly as now. As if he’s high, high above the ground, outside a planet’s atmosphere despite the air he clearly breathes.

It’s like nothing he’s ever seen.

It’s all the more strange when he realizes that only the sky above them is starry. Beneath the bridge yawns a massive, empty void, like a canyon of pure nothingness. The hairs on the back of his neck stand up when he looks down again.
If you stare into the void long enough, the void stares back.

He whips his head back up, focusing on Loki.

“What’s down there?” he asks. Even so far away, it feels... not right. Not wrong, exactly but not... not right.

“I’m not really sure,” Loki replies, glancing down over the edge as well. “We just call it ‘The Void’. My theory is that it’s an open doorway. Or a set of doorways, perhaps. I’m not sure where it leads, though, and I don’t fancy throwing myself off the bridge to find out.”

Fair enough.

The ornament in space is impressive, he’ll give it that. He loosens his grip on the saddle in favor of twisting around, trying to take everything in at once. All the shimmering, dark-gold rings, all the nebulas, the galaxies behind a network of burnished metal lace centering on an open circle like the center of an eye. The massive man standing in the center of the room takes a back seat to this feat of construction, this marvel.

Tony wants to get off the horse and poke around, but Loki snaps his fingers briskly.

“Tony, pay attention. This is Heimdall, Watcher of the Nine Realms.”

He tears his eyes away to look at this Heimdall dude. He remembers Frigga mentioning him.

“Uh, hey.”

“Tony Stark,” Heimdall acknowledges, inclining his head. “My sister has told me of you.”

“That’s cool- Hey wait. Who’s your sister? You don’t exactly look familiar.”

Well, he does. Kind of. Not in a way he can place.

“Idunn.” The apple chick. Tony remembers that much. “She... speaks well of your mentor.”

“Oh, uh, cool.” Again, he gets the feeling that he’s supposed to be a hell of a lot more ‘wowed’ by this revelation, going by Loki’s expression, but look. Let’s be honest. Tony doesn’t exactly have the background knowledge of who’s who among the upper crust here in Asgard. Idunn might be important, but apart from that brief meeting, Tony hasn’t interacted with her. She’s just another person to him. “Let her know I say hi, alright? Alright. Good talk.”

He hears an exasperated ‘Tony’ from Loki, but hey, what’s he supposed to do? Go gaga over someone he doesn’t know?

Yeah, no. He just files this information away as ‘who should I warn Unnur about potentially giving her the shovel talk’ and moves on.

Loki exchanges words with Heimdall, and the truly massive man plunges a truly massive sword into his pedestal. The rings and spokes on the wall whirl to life, and the center of the ‘eye’ begins to shine with rays of multi-colored, faceted light. And Loki- Loki guides his horse towards the swirling light.

“So we go in that, and it takes us where we need to go?”

“Essentially, yes,” Loki replies drily, not at all impressed by Tony’s oversimplification of things.
“Okay, great.”

This should be fun. If a little terrifying. He scrambles off the horse, nearly losing his footing and landing on his face when a foot gets caught in the stirrups, but he lands on the sleek, shimmering floor, staring at the whirling colors.

“Get back on the horse,” Loki sighs in exasperation. “We’re going to need them.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

Before Tony gives himself the chance to talk himself out of the idea, he sprints forwards, launching himself into the center of the eye.

And it’s awesome.

Tony shoots headlong into a tunnel of light. All around him he can see stars flying past, through the shards of rainbow light. He wants to reach out and touch the barrier, which undulates and dances like the Northern Lights, but there’s a good five feet of space between him and the light from every angle. All too soon the journey ends, and Tony abruptly finds singed ground beneath his feet. The sudden change throws Tony off balance, and his arms windmill as he steps back, then falls flat on his ass.

Loki drops down beside him not much later, but he remains regal and secure atop his unruffled horse. The grey horse is beside him. Loki holds the reins.

“Why must you be so difficult,” Loki huffs, but the glimmer in his eyes points to amusement and, oddly enough, a sort of pride.

“You like it when I’m difficult,” Tony snarks back. Loki rolls his eyes and points sternly to the unmanned horse.

“You like it when I’m difficult,” Tony snarks back. Loki rolls his eyes and points sternly to the unmanned horse.

“Up. We have a ways to ride.”

“I’ll level with you.” Tony gets up and brushes grey dust off his pants. “I don’t know how to ride a horse.”

“That much is obvious. And yet, needs must. Come on. Up.”

“Can’t you just teleport us, Princess?” he gripes, cautiously approaching the placid grey beast.

“I cannot. In order to teleport oneself to a location through magic alone, one must have physically been there at some point in time, however briefly. I have yet to find a work-around for that.” Loki looks entirely displeased, but hey, he’s the magic-expert. Tony will assume he knows what he’s talking about.

Tony tries to swing himself up into the saddle like he saw Loki do earlier, but he… he has issues. It’s not a matter of strength; Tony hasn’t exactly been wasting away, given the plentiful food and long hours of hard labor. He just has no clue how to do this properly. Loki tsks and grabs the back of his pants to haul him into place.

The prince coaches Tony through how to properly ride a horse, from how to hold the reins to how to sway with the horse. However, Tony can’t help but be distracted. This irritates his companion to no end, but come on.

They’re riding on an asteroid, for christ’s sake.
There’s a whole field of asteroid around them, actually. Mostly they look like massive boulders drifting in the air, but oddly enough, what seem to be… twisting vines, or really dusty cables as big around as a school bus bridge the gaps between some of them, holding them in a network.

Like stony dewdrops on a spider’s web.

Somehow, Tony manages to get the basics down on how to steer the animal beneath him. This leaves him plenty of time to wonder how exactly gravity works here, given that the asteroid they were previously on is now above their head, after Loki led him across one of the massive cables. Forget gravity, how does air work here?

“What is all this?”

“A nest, of sorts. ‘All this’-” He gestures broadly to the field of asteroids in their cabled network. “-is intended to prevent invaders from reaching the center.”

“It doesn’t exactly work, does it? I mean, we’re here.”

Loki grins wickedly.

“Compared to the creature at the center of this nest, we are little more than ants. The beast will not care whether we reach it or not.”

Tony swallows thickly. Beast, huh?

“We’re going to see a beast. A beast compared to which we are ants.”

Color him intrigued.

The maze of shifting asteroids starts to thin, and through the gaps Tony starts to see more than stars.

He sees a moon.

Big, rough, and silver-grey, it looks like a vaguely-egg-shaped, craggy moon. It floats, suspended in emptiness at the center of the spherical nest of asteroids. A few cables- spindly looking in comparison to the massive rock- thread their way through the emptiness to the moon, but otherwise there would be no way to reach it.

Unless you could fly.

Loki hums to himself as their horses trot easily along the cables bridging the nothingness, and Tony can’t help the shivers that slip up and down his spine. It’s- weird. It’s weird, okay? This whole place is set up unlike anything his tiny human brain can comprehend given his set of experiences. It’s magic. He’s sure of it. Bullshit magic.

They dismount at the edge of a massive, yawning crevice in the egg-shaped rock. Loki announces that the horses will not run away if left unattended, so they leave the animals behind and proceed on foot, down down down into the cavern.

Loki still insists on it being a surprise, which is frustrating. Tony’s doesn’t know what to expect. An alien thing, obviously. It lives in an asteroid nest in space for fuck’s sake. Other than that? He doesn’t have any acceptable well of knowledge from which to pull. It could be an alien, or it could be a mythical creature, or it could just be- well. He doesn’t know, okay?
What he does know is that the huge passage ends with a sheer drop, and beyond that drop is a sea of shining metal.

There’s gold, he thinks. There’s also silver metal that could be silver or platinum or something else entirely. He can make out specks of color that might be jewels. It’s a sea of coins, and sculpture and technology and treasure, and Tony starts to get the sneaking suspicion that he might know what this ‘beast is.

And yeah, suspicion confirmed. Curled up on a pile of treasure is a motherfucking dragon.

“No way,” Tony whispers, eyes glued to the gargantuan lizard. “No fucking way. Is that…?”

“A dragon, yes.”

Loki sounds entirely too pleased with himself.

“A… fuck. Wow. I mean- wow.”

“Come, come. I want to get a closer look.”

Loki carefully drops himself over the cliff edge and free-climbs his way down, with Tony following after. It’s not a huge drop to the floor of treasure- maybe thirty feet. Still enough to break a bone from, if Tony loses his grip.

He does not lose his grip, though, and Tony trails along behind Loki as the prince steps lightly, trying to shift as little treasure as possible. It’s a strange feeling, walking across immeasurable wealth, but without being told, Tony knows better than to try and take anything. If this dragon is anything like the stories on Earth, it’s going to be protective of its hoard.

“Is this a good idea?” he asks.

“Perhaps not, but what harm are we doing? Besides. It’s sleeping.”

Closer up, the creature still looks entirely too large to be anything but intimidating. Its rounded, shiny scales glitter a deep, dark silver in the light of what seem to be glowing crystals embedded in the vaulting ceiling. It seems to have two sets of horns, one smaller set curling down, and another, larger set arcing up and slightly forward. They seem… kind of like purple crystals, actually, rather than bone or horn. A set of rippling, dangerous-looking spines dots down its back, made of what looks to be the same purple gemstone. Smoke curls up lazily out of each flared nostril.

Four crystal-violet eyes snap open, and both Tony and Loki flinch back, immediately falling still. Tony’s heart hammers in his chest. Uh, yeah. The dragon is amazing, but technically they’re trespassing, and Tony really hoped the dragon was going to stay asleep.

“Hey Lo?” he ventures quietly. “Maybe zap us back to the horses now.”

“I cannot,” comes the shocked reply after a moment’s effort.

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

Tony takes a step back as the dragon rolls to its feet, but a curious sensation of water dripping up
his legs takes hold of him, and a quick look down confirms that yes, his feet and calves are totally encased in metal. He can’t move. Loki finds himself in the same position.

“I mean something is blocking my magic.”

_That would be me, young prince._

The words form in his head, he thinks. They have a distinctive voice, and yet there is no sound. Loki gulps audibly, which isn’t exactly a comforting sound. Tony drags his eyes back to the dragon ambling closer.

“We apologize, oh great dragon. We simply-”

_Don’t play coy with me, young prince. You’re not sorry at all._

The dragon looms over them, its belly crusted in gems and precious metals. Tony looks up with wide eyes.

_And yet you are not thieves. I can tell this much. What am I to do with you?_

The dragon sounds more exasperated than anything, like a parent handling troublesome children. Which is probably a good thing. Better exasperated than consumed by murderous fury.

_Look at you, the dragon murmurs, settling itself down so that Tony is held in the gaze of one massive, violet eye. Aren’t you an odd one? Where are you from, little one?_

“Uh…” He looks to Loki for guidance. Loki shrugs his shoulders. “Earth.”

_Midgard, then. And yet you feel… older, in a way. Older than your Earth._

“I’m really not. I’m forty two, actually. Just a little bit younger than Earth. Just a little.”

The dragon blinks slowly and lifts its head again.

_I would speak with you. Alone. You may call me Elder._

Loki shouts in alarm as Elder scoops Tony up its claws, the metal around his legs melting away.

“Don’t panic,” Tony shouts back to where Loki is still trapped as Elder carried him away.

Elder could have crushed him or eaten him already if he wanted. This is fine. Everything is fine. Probably.

Elder lumbers along on three legs as Tony sits huddled in its palm, carried deeper and deeper into the central asteroid. The chill of the treasure cavern gives way to a sort of humid warmth, and Tony again can’t do much but look around in wonder as bleak stone becomes mossy green, and the tunnel Elder chose lets out at the grassy edge of an underground lake. More ceiling-crystals shed light on the meadow surrounding the lake, and Elder sets Tony down on an elevated stone outcropping while he- he sounds masculine in Tony’s head- settles in the grass. He blinks, the smattering of small purple gems around his eyes glinting in the light.

“What is all this?”

/Home. I thought that much would be obvious, given that I live here. It’s impressive isn’t it? Took ages to get the environment right. Magic is fickle you know._
“You practice magic?”

*Practice? Oh no, little one. I and my kind invented magic. Or Seidr, as your companion might know it. Now. What are you?*

What kind of question is that? Tony comes from Earth. Or Midgard. Of another time, but still. It’s not that hard to make the leap from Earth to Human.

“I’m a man, last I checked. Uh, a human, specifically.”

Elder cocks his massive head speculatively.

*Perhaps. But you are also something other, little one. Something not of these worlds. Why is that?*

Oh, that.

“I’m kinda from the future, I think. Is that it?”

Elder ponders this, lip curled up slightly to bare teeth.

*Perhaps. Perhaps not. You are unfamiliar to me. For something to be so utterly foreign to me of all beings… It is strange. Very strange. The dragon’s scales rustle and settle, and the gem-spiked tail swishes through the water behind him. Far behind him. Tony is still a little mind-boggled by how big this thing is. The dragon’s bones have to be something amazing, otherwise the weight of his body would have collapsed in on itself. What of this light in your chest? What is that?*

Tony’s hand lifts automatically, rubbing over the casing through his shirt and vest. When he looked in the mirror that morning, finally able to shave, the leather of the snap-collared vest did a fair job of blocking the glow.

“How did you…?”

*The younger species- humans and jotuns and Aes included- lack all the senses of the ancient. You have five- six, arguably. I have more. Now the light, little one. Tell me of it.*

And tell Tony does. Not once does he feel uncomfortable. He gets the sense that Elder wants knowledge for knowledge’s sake alone, and somehow, that makes it easier to explain what it does, how he got it, and how it was made.

*You were playing with the distortion of gravity?*

“I was bored, okay? Bored me is not an idle me.”

*I fail to see how your boredom spontaneously created matter not native to this universe.*

Tony blinks, frowns. What?

“What does that mean? Not native? How is that possible?”

Elder shrugs his massive shoulders, bringing up curved talons as long as Tony is tall. He cleans them meticulously with his slender tongue.

*Why would I ask you if I did not already know? Trust me when I say that the light in your chest is not of your worlds, nor of mine. Whether you are a traveler through time or not, that- He gingerly taps the arc reactor through the leather with the tip of one gemstone talon- is not meant to be here.*
The dragon goes back to cleaning his claws.

Tony scratches behind his ear, chewing on his cheek. That’s new information.

“D’you think it’s going to cause a problem for anyone? I mean, is it dangerous to keep around?”

Elder considers this, then shakes his head, a lilting rumble echoing from his chest.

No. As far as I can tell, your light currently prevents magic from affecting you. Otherwise, I think it benign.

“That’s… not exactly right. Loki- the other guy you kinda left back there- he’s, you know, turned me into a snake. And truth-spelled me. And Odin did his feather test on me.”

Negative magic then. It protects you.

“How can you be sure?”

Because you are still conscious, and just this moment I attempted to temporarily asphyxiate you, to render you unconscious. And yet, here you stand. Your light is a shield. Keep it with you, little one.

He’s not sure how to feel about that. He hopes Elder was confident enough in the reactor’s protective properties to risk trying to ‘temporarily asphyxiate’ him, but… he’s a massive lizard with teeth the size of Tony’s forearm. There’s no guarantee at all that Elder cares whether or not he lives. Or passes out.

“Okay. Uh, will do. It’s sorta, you know, essential to my survival at the moment, so no problems there. So you- you’re…” Tony gestures in the dragon’s general direction. “Really big. How- how old are you? I mean- I’ve never seen a dragon before. And you can do magic. That’s- Wow.”

Elder snorts in something resembling a laugh, smoke pouring from his nostrils.

Old. Very old. That is all you need to know. And yes, of course I practice magic. Dragonkind was born of seidr and stone. Our blood sings with old power. And you. I can smell it on you. You are learning. Not strong, but… yes. Learning.

“Yeah, learning.” Tony rubs the back of his head, making a face. “I keep burning everything, though.”

Burning?

“Yeah, when I try to, y’know, teleport things- mostly flowers- they all end up burnt.”

The dragon before him throws his head back, barking out bell-like percussive sounds in what is definitely laughter. Elder rises to his feet again, folded wings shuffling and adjusting on his back.

You began with teleportation? Truly? Ha! That is foolishness, like having an infant dance before it can hold its own head up. What idiot would teach a new student teleportation before basic energy manipulation?

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‘That idiot’ happens to still be struggling to free himself from the metal encasing his legs. Tony hitches a ride back on one of Elder’s elbow spines as the scaly behemoth returns to the ocean of treasure.
“Hey, Loki!” Tony calls, waving the hand not currently clutching one of the creases of the purple spine. “See? I’m fine!”

“Oh, wonderful, and you’ve made a new friend,” Loki snaps back, eyes wide. “Are we free to go?”

The metal withdraws from around Loki’s legs, reforming into treasure, and Loki staggers back. Tony hops off the elbow-spine when Elder reaches the prince. He manages to keep his footing in the shifting treasure, and Elder peers down at them with all four crystal violet eyes as he helps Loki from where he’s slipped and fallen.

Yes, you may leave, Elder announces imperiously as he looms high above them. However. You are not permitted to continue training this one here in the ways of seidr. He nudges Tony with the flat of one talon. Not every expert has the makings of a teacher. You certainly do not.

Loki splutters, color rising to his cheeks.

“Relax, babe. You just got complimented by a dragon!” He shoves Loki’s shoulder playfully, grinning broadly. “How awesome is that?”

“I’m not certain whether that counts as a compliment.”

Elder puffs white smoke in their direction. He yawns and shakes himself out.

You, little one, I will see in two days. Young prince, I trust you can find your way home.

The dragon curls down into the treasure again, adding to the crust of precious materials on his otherwise-soft belly. He closes one of the eyes facing them, leaving the other to watch over his hoard while Tony and Loki pick their way out.

“What did it mean, ‘I’ll see you in two days’?” Loki demands, as they climb the cliff again. Tony looks down to where Loki clings to the rock below him, and puffs out a breath of air. He focuses on hauling himself up again.


Loki is suspiciously quiet. Tony pulls himself up back on the top, then turns around to help Loki up as well. The pair of them sit on the edge of the cliff, not quite touching, and look out at the sleeping dragon. Loki turns to him abruptly, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“What did it ask of you?”

“What? Why do you think he asked something?” Tony replies defensively, because yeah. This might be the part Loki likes least. Tony usually knows better than to make impossible deals, but come on! A dragon offered to teach him magic! How could he say no to that?

“Dragons do nothing without demanding payment. What did it- he ask for?”

Tony worries the inside of his cheek again, rubbing a hand over the reactor.

“He may have asked me to bring him the heart of a star.”

“The heart of a- Tony.” Loki rubs one eye with the heel of his hand.

“I know! It sounds stupid, but look princess. He says there’s no time limit, and you’re looking at a man who synthesized a completely new element in his basement! I do the impossible all the time,
Lo; I’ll figure something out.”

“You are absolutely mad.”

Tony grins.

“Oh yeah. The maddest.”

And that is how he comes to meet with a dragon twice weekly. This leaves him two days each week to putter around in his workshop, but hey. It’s totally worth it.

Chapter End Notes

As always, I do this for comments and kudos and my own love of writing.
Tony turns out to be exceedingly prolific in his workshop, now that he has one to himself. The shelves and walls quickly line with tools and materials he didn’t even know existed prior to obtaining them. He has huge spools of veining and coated wires of various kinds mounted on axles, and the monkeys have to be shooed away from them. Inky especially has a tendency to get tangles, which is a waste of resources and a headache to undo.

The suit is almost fully repaired, though, although it’s based in electricity rather than veins. He has plans drawn up for a completely new suit to test the veins in, but he wants his first one fixed up and functional before starting on that new project.

His forty-third birthday comes and goes (well, the equivalent of it does. Time works differently on Asgard). There’s a small celebration, attended by Frigga, Loki, and Unnur. They hold it on a pavilion near Idunn’s home, because Unnur wanted to invite her too, and apparently Idunn dies if she leaves her garden, which- yikes. Tony doesn’t know how exactly that came about, but apparently her life-force is directly interwoven with those of her special apple trees. She leaves, she dies, then the trees die, and then apparently everyone dies. More slowly. Via aging. But still. On a planet of immortal ‘gods’, dying of old age is kind of a big deal.

There’s this sort of fruity cake layered with a weird zesty, kind of earthy whipped cream and berries he doesn’t recognize and topped in flowers, but no apples. They’re forbidden to him, though Tony hadn’t even considered begging for one until he was preemptively denied one. Now, it’s all he can do to hold his tongue while Idunn cuts the cake.

Elder puts him through his paces, birthday or not. He makes Tony start at sorcerer’s kindergarten-making his fingers sparkle.

The pace at which the dragon pushes Tony to learn is punishing. On the days the inventor is beamed down to Elder’s lair, he ends up trudging home exhausted and sore. What is even up with that? There’s not a whole lot of physical activity going on when he’s moving a gold coin from one side of the cave to the other while sitting smack dab in the center. He isn’t exactly straining his muscles when Elder tells him to change the color of a gemstone.

And yet, the soreness.

Elder says it’s because proper magic is a full-body experience. Tony says it’s because bullshit.

Loki, however, is all-too happy to help him work away the soreness on some days, either through a carefully-negotiated massage or something a little more… exerting. Tony isn’t complaining.

On other days, Loki is just as exhausted as Tony is, and they curl up around each other and doze. Tony almost always demands to be the big spoon, or the one on top if they’re sprawled out in a
tangle. He doesn’t like feeling trapped, even by Loki.

And then comes the day that Frigga goes home. Because apparently, she wasn’t born on Asgard. Huh. Who knew?

Instead, Frigga comes from a place called Vanaheim.

And she invites Tony to come along.

Well, not just Tony. She also invites Thor and Loki, but Thor declines the invitation in favor of a hunting trip. So it’s just Tony and Loki tagging along as the Queen of the Nine Realms stands before the bifrost’s oculus.

They’re set down in a stone circle, in the center of what seems to be a spring of crystal-clear water. A bridge extends out from the stone circle, over the water, and to a large palace of hewn stone, covered in outcroppings of trees and grass and flowers. Tony stares, wide-eyed, when he realizes the palace isn’t just made of stone. It’s carved into a mountain.

Attendants in purple clothing come to take their bags, while a regal pair waits at the mouth of the bridge. Two young girls with intricately-braided hair run to Frigga with arms outstretched.

“Frig! Frig!” the smaller one shouts, and Frigga laughs, immediately sinking fluidly to her knees to embrace both girls in a hug.

“My aunts,” Loki clarifies with amusement. “It’s a bit strange to have aunts younger than yourself, but oh well.”

He leaves Tony’s side to approach the pair of adults, a man and a woman, each wearing a tall, organic-looking crown.

“Grandfather, Grandmother,” the trickster greets formally, but the man—Frigga’s dad, apparently—ruffles Loki’s wavy hair and pulls him into a fierce hug.

“Loki,” the woman coos. “It’s been some time, hasn’t it?”

Loki’s grandparents are introduced to Tony as Fjorgynn (although Tony is, to his relief, given permission to call the man ‘Gynn’) and Miorna. The elder of the little girls is Hchimir, and the younger is Gyrni. Great. So, introductions made, Tony now watches as a man and a woman in purple lift the chest containing all 235 pounds of repaired suit. All by themselves. Like it’s nothing but feathers.

Tony swallows down his muscle-envy and comes back to himself just soon enough to duck out of the way of a hug from Miorna. The moment he realizes what he did, though, his stomach does a little flip-flop. Was the faux-pax? Did he just insult the queen of a planet?

Instead, Miorna smiles, folding her hands in front of the braided belt she has around her hips.

“You don’t like hugs?” she clarifies.

“I, uh. I don’t like touch, really. Especially not from strangers. No offense,” he tacks on.

“None taken. Thank you for letting me know.”

And bless her, she sounds earnest. Tony cocks his head, trying to figure out whether she’s mocking him. Why the fuck would she be thanking him for his inconvenient quirk?
She simply smiles at him again and turns to take her husband’s hand as they walk along the stone bridge to their castle. Frigga holds her littlest sister on her hip, with the other trails along after, chattering non-stop. Huh. It makes sense that Frigga has a family outside of her husband and sons, but actually seeing it? Well. Somehow that makes her seem more… human. Tony knows that isn’t the right word, given the fact that she’s an alien, but his point stands. She seems like less of a goddess and more of a person now that he sees she gets her strawberry hair from her father’s side, and her eyes from her mom.

Tony and Loki are shown to the same room, despite neither of them saying anything about their, uh, **togetherness**. And they aren’t. Together, that is. Strictly friends with benefits. Strictly.

It’s telling, though, that Gynn sends them off with a servant to show them to a shared room, whereas Tony gets the feeling such a thing would never happen on Asgard. The Vanir are much less judgy, from what he sees. More open. More accepting.

Hell, apparently the king of the southern hemisphere is gay. And happily married to boot. So two kings.

From what Tony gathers, there are two kingdoms on this planet. A northern and a southern kingdom. The rulers are always siblings. So the Southern King is the brother of Miorna, and when they come of age, Hchimir and Gyrni will ascend to the thrones while their parents and uncles essentially retire to live on their country estates or become ambassadors or something. It’s a neat system, in his opinion. He doesn’t know how disputes as to whose kids get to rule are settled, but going by the relaxed, laid-back mannerisms of his hosts he’s guessing it’s with peaceful debate. Or an election, maybe.

More to the immediate point, he and Loki have a room to themselves, no judgy eyes to hide from, and nowhere to be until dinner time.

Later, when they’re bathed and presentable again, Tony helps Loki wrestle his way into a robe-looking thing that goes down to his knees, over a pair of pants. Apparently the draping sleeves and loose outerwear is typical vanir casual clothes. Tony prefers his more, uh, **supportive** pants and shirt. He fastens the line of buttons up Loki’s back, one by one, while Loki drinks from a cup. This guys really is too good to be true, huh? Smart, sarcastic, with a biting sense of humor. He’s beautiful. Tony wishes he still had access to his fortune. Dressing Loki in designer suits and flaunting him at stuffy parties would just be **perfect**. Oof. Not to mention if he could convince the prince to put on heels. Now **that** would be a sight to behold.

“You know what this makes me think?” is what slips out, though. Almost like the words really don’t give a damn whether their speak wants them out in the world.

“Mm?”

He makes a face. Too late to back out now. He tries not to lie, not to Loki. Tony isn’t always perfect about it, but he tries.

“How **great** you’d look in a dress.”

He tries to inject the words with a bit of humor, in case Loki would rather just brush them away. Loki, however, nearly spits out his water in a huff of bitter laughter.

“There’s no need to mock me,” he grumbles.

“Who says I’m mocking?” Tony brushes curly black hair off of Loki’s neck and presses a kiss to
the skin just beneath. “You’re gorgeous, babe. No matter what, you’re gorgeous.”

He earns a kiss of his own for that, and Loki smooths out the tufts of brown hair still sticking up despite their bath. Tony still rushes his baths, and no matter how long he lives, he’s pretty sure that little quirk isn’t going away. He stays in just long enough to clean himself, then scrambles out, heart pounding. Why don’t lakes and ponds and pools trigger him? Fuck if he knows. Baths, however. Tubs. Showers. Those are no good.

They have dinner at a cozy round table beneath the fading colors of the sky. Tony has to hand it to Frigga’s parents. Having a palace carved into the peak of a mountain makes for a truly fantastic view of the sunset. Frigga forces a tight smile when her mom brings up Odin’s health.

“Later, Mother,” she says. “We will speak of him later.”

Not long after that, Tony is pulled from the table by his sleeve and pulled into a game of tag by Loki’s aunts. Magical tag. The little girls are shapeshifters, which is incredibly unfair. How is he supposed to escape properly with Gyrni leaping at him as some kind of big cat cub or Hchmir dive-bombing him as some hook-billed bird? That’s not to even mention Loki.

Needless to say, he loses. Badly. But it’s hard to be angry at a loss when the victors are a couple of curly-haired children.

Their little vacation is planned in thirds. Five days in the home of Frigga’s parents, five in the home of her uncles, and the last five back with her parents.

Her uncles are awesome. Tibic and Rochrin. Rochrin has the deepest laugh-lines around his eyes and mouth that Tony’s ever seen, and Tibic has this wild mad-hatter hair and a fondness for these six-winged beetles. He’s always wearing one as decoration, a gold or silver, sometimes-jeweled chain fastened to the glimmering carapace of whichever pet- and they are pets. He has a whole elaborate enclosure dedicated to his beetles- he wants to wear. The attachment is held in place via magic rather than glue, so the beetle can be returned to its home at the end of the day no worse for the wear.

More interesting than the southern kings, though, is Morgan.

Frigga, he learns, spent much of her adolescence with Tibic and Rochrin for the purpose of studying under Morgan’s tutelage. She is a rounder woman, with grey hair streaked white and piercing eyes like fire opals.

She’s beautiful. Ethereal. Fae.

Fae. Fay. Fey?

Hold on.

Morgan le Fey?

No. That’s crazy.

Right?

It doesn’t matter, because she’s here, not in England, and she’s currently pouring Tony tea.

Loki is spending time with his mother and great-uncles, out hunting or something like that. Tony, however, refuses to get on a horse without very, very good reason, so he was left to wander the
palace—again, carved into a mountain. Somewhere along the way he bumped into Morgan while turning a corner, knocking the older woman down. She’d taken one look at him and decided, hey. Let’s make this guy tea. So Tony had followed her to her wing. And yeah, she has a whole wing to herself. The perks of being the royal sorceress, he guesses. Or whatever it is that she’s called.

They sit in a rather close room, one lined in cluttered bookshelves and tapestries and lit entirely by two candles on either side of the table. The table between them is the only clear space in this little room. The teapot is suspended over a little candle to keep it warm, and Tony looks down into his full cup morosely. He doesn’t like tea.

Morgan won’t even let him sweeten it, so it’s all bitter and grassy in his mouth, but he drinks anyways, because he gets the feeling that Morgan isn’t the type of woman you cross.

They sit in silence as they drink, until finally the pot is empty. Then, Morgan sets her cup down and grimaces.

“I hate this type of tea,” she announces. Tony looks at her in bewilderment.

“Why the fuck did we drink the whole damn pot, then?” he demands, incredulous.

“It’s bracing,” is the only explanation he gets.

“We could have just had, I don’t know, coffee. Or something.”

“I like coffee even less.”

“Well then.”

Blasphemy.

Morgan regards him curiously, then rolls up to her feet, a smile on her face. She clears away the teapot, dumping the drew into one of the plants behind a thick curtain. In doing so, she lets in a flash of sun and nearly blinds Tony, but okay. That’s fine.

“So how—You were Frigga’s, uh, teacher, right?”

She makes a noise of affirmation and ambles around the room, lighting candles as she goes to intensify the glow cast by the first two, until the room is awash with warm light. When she sits down again, they talk. And it’s—interesting. Morgan doesn’t have the cleanest sense of humor, which Tony finds hilarious, but she never really disrespects anyone for the sake of a joke. Tony hears all about Frigga’s misadventures as a student of magic, how she turned her Uncles’ favorite horse mauve for a time until she learned how to reverse the change, how strong-headed and stubborn she had been in her childhood without age to temper her. Tony ends up wiping tears out of his eyes from laughing so hard. Christ. Apparently, the whole ‘princess and the frog’ story had stemmed from the queen panicking at the advances of an unwanted suitor and cursing him. He’d eventually found his ‘true love’ and returned to a less amphibious form, but god. Tony honestly can’t picture Frigga doing half of what Morgan is saying, but he really, really hopes it’s true.

Oh my god, does he hope it’s true.

“And did you know? Girl has two mothers, three fathers,” she announces, as though that explains everything.

“How, uh… How does that work?” Tony can’t help a grin.
“There’s the birth ones, right? Gynn and Miorna. I taught Miorna when she was little, but she
moved on to another mentor after a few years. Then the uncles. Your future mother-in-law lived
with them when she was learning from me.” Tony nearly chokes on his juice—something sour-
sweet like green lemonade. “- so they took over the parenting. And then there’s me.” She crosses
her own arms, looking entirely like the cat that got the cream, and winks conspiratorially. “You
and I are alike, you see. Neither of us feels the pull. You know, for fucking.”

Tony bursts out laughing again.

“Oh hell, we’re not talking about fucking. Which I do, by the way. I like it very much.”

“That doesn’t make us any less alike, my boy. Attraction is a fickle thing, and it is a stranger to us
both. You like to fuck, and I don’t. That doesn’t change who we are.”

How does she know about this? His humor fades just a bit. Once upon a time he’d liked using the
term- asexual. It was a source of pride. Finally, he had thought. A way to describe himself. And
then of course people would tell him he was too young to know, or tell him they’d help him, a
sixteen-year-old surrounded by adult college students, ‘figure out how to be normal’. One woman
had even tried to rape him, to ‘show him how to want it’. Thank fucking christ Rhodey had been
there with him. Then he started to clam up, not to make a big deal. He didn’t want to risk anyone
else spiking his drink for the sake of proving him wrong.

“Anyways, the point is, I am one in a long, long line of seeresses, and my duties have been passed
from mother to daughter for as long as time has spun its threads. The thought of- popping out a
screaming baby is just as abhorrent as the thought of actually producing it. Therefore- Frigga. She
was born with all time in her eyes, and I knew when she showed up on my doorstep as a growing
girl that she would be the one.” Morgan taps her finger on the table. “So I became her second
mother, and she learned everything I had to teach. Of all my achievements, of everything I have
seen and done, I am proudest of my girl.”

Which is touching, really. What must it have been like? To have grown up surrounded by such a
loving family. It’s like… Well.

It’s not like anything he can imagine, really. Tony swallows, looking down into the smoky glass of
tart juice.

He decides to move on.

“What are the duties, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I don’t mind at all, my boy. In fact, that’s why I snatched you away. I have some questions for
you too.

To understand the answer to your question, you must first understand the Tree. Yggdrasil, the
universe in which we live. I don’t think it’s an actual, physical tree, but it’s a good analogy
nonetheless. Like an oak, which lives within a cycle of seasons, Yggdrasil experiences a spring,
summer, fall, and winter. We are currently living in Yggdrasil’s summer, when the worlds have
already formed, but before autumn’s Ragnarok.”

Tony purses his lips, trying to take all of what she’s saying in. Uh, okay. World tree. That’s Norse.
That’s a viking idea, he thinks. It’s as interesting a way to explain the universe as any. Personally
he subscribes to the Big Bang theory himself, but whatever floats her boat is fine. He’s not going to
get into an argument about the origin of the universe with Morgan.
“Okay, and, uh, what does that have to do with me?”

“In each of Yggdrasil’s springs, the first to come into being are three beings, which we call the Norns. Together, they listen to the tree and lay out the fate of every being, every insect, every rock and grain of sand. They take the threads of all existence and arrange them in their most stable configuration. Like taking magnets, and setting them up so they all perfectly repel each other.”

With a very understated glimmer of silver, Morgan summons a number of round metallic- well, probably magnets, and with a wave of her hand she sets them up on the table to, as she said, perfectly repel. She gestures at the metal balls.

“Frigga’s duties, and mine before her, and my mother’s, and my grandmother’s, and so on and so forth since the conception of my family line, are to know. To see the threads of fate the Norns spun, and to tend to them. Why? I don’t know. Perhaps there was a reason once, but it has been lost. All I know is that there must always be a Weaver to lay out the tapestries of time. You, though. You."

She summons to her hand a shiny, red metal ball the same size as the others and tosses it into the perfectly-balanced pool of magnets. Rather than disrupt the fields to force the spheres to come together, the red ball kicks of one, which disrupts another, which disrupts more, until all the spheres are tumbling around, never wanting to touch, struggling and failing to find equilibrium once more. They grow more and more tumultuous as Tony watches warily, but before spheres can start shooting themselves off the table, Morgan waves her hands over them, and they vanish.

Message received.

“I’m screwing everything up?”

Figures.

“Now see, that’s where things get interesting. For once in my life, I don’t know. The tapestries of time are woven with the threads of fate, but for whatever reason, they’re unraveling. I would hazard a guess that you were the catalyst, the grain of sand that unbalanced everything. Is this good? Is this bad? I don’t know. But I do know that destiny is growing hazier. What was decided at the beginning of this cycle is no longer a guarantee.”

“Look, I’m not trying to fuck shit up, okay? I’m just from the wrong time. I don’t know why I’m here, or how I got here, or how to get back. Are you seriously telling me that a random, uncontrolled jump through time is causing me to ruin everything?”

Shit. Shit fuck. Why him? He scrubs a hand over his face and tries to take calming breaths.

“Not at all.” Tony snaps his head up to look at Morgan. “I’d say you’re providing me with the first surprise I’ve had in my entire life, and I’d like to thank you for that. Now buck up, my boy. You’re one man. One man cannot destroy a universe. Yggdrasil will continue to live, just as it has since before time began, and just as it will after time once more ends.”

As it turns out, Morgan doesn’t actually ask him any questions. His reactions are enough to satisfy her curiosity for the moment, however that works. He’s still completely nonplussed by the prospect of him being a fate-altering magnet- he doesn’t even believe in fate. And yet, that’s what Morgan calls him. Christ, what if Frigga thinks that of him? That he’s just running around like a bull in a china shop, screwing up things wherever he goes.

Loki finds him sulking by a fountain, watching these reptilian not-turtles interact with bright,
colorful fish that can swim up the fountain spray. He’s hiding something behind his back, and that perks Tony up a little bit. He doesn’t always like surprises, but Loki-surprises tend to be good.

“Watcha got there, Snowflake?” he calls as the prince trots up to him. “Something good?”

“I bring to you, fair maiden,” Loki declaims, going to one knee. Tony snorts. “The horn of a nilfbald, as a token of my affection.” He produces a spiral-ribbed horn, about as thick around at the base as Tony’s bicep. It’s a sort of dusky yellow-brown, like matte gold.

“First, I’m no maiden. You can be the maiden, but I’m not a maiden at all, Princess. Second, why did you bring me a goat horn?”

A really, really big goat’s horn, but it looks like a goat horn to Tony.

“You’re no fun. It’s a nilfbald horn, Tony. I shot it myself, and now I bring you the spoils of my hunt. Treasure it always.”

Loki passes the horn off to Tony, who looks it over appraisingly.

“Eh, I guess it’ll make a nice paperweight. Thanks, babe.”

He presses a kiss to Loki’s forehead, and Loki links his arm around Tony’s. The inventor asks about the hunt, how it went, and apparently they’re going to be having a feast tomorrow, using the animals brought down by the hunting party. Loki seems really, unexpectedly excited about the nilf-whatever.

“It was truly a sight to behold, Tony! It stood as tall as this hallway, with a matted mane of black and yellow. Teeth like- like- well. It’s an herbivore, so the teeth aren’t impressive, but the hooves! Such a majestic creature. I have half a mind to request horns on my helmet as tribute.”

“No.”

“... What?”

“C’mon, babe. No goat horns on your helmet. You’ve got a great helmet already. Why do you need to be a reindeer too?”

Tony watches Loki purse his lips, offended.

“You see, this is why you should have come. You simply don’t understand the nobility of a nilfbald.”

“And yet, despite it’s nobility, we’re having it for dinner. Fancy that.”

Loki rolls his eyes.

“I will honor the beast with horns on my armor.”

“Small ones. Small ones, babe.”

“...Fine. Small ones.”

Tony’s seen Loki’s armor, and it is- mmm. It’s nice. It does not need stupid goat horns on it. Completely show, no function, unless Loki plans on stabilizing the helmet and using headbutting as his main attack. Tony knows he’s a hypocrite; he’s a showboater himself. But seriously- horns? He’s going to see if he can talk Loki down from his helmet plans later.
The next day is the feast, and then the day after… Frigga comes to him, eyes alight, and asks if he’s ready to test the armor. He thinks she means against something, like a monster or heavily-armored soldiers, or wooden dummies maybe. Nope.

She means flight.

He stands on the edge of a platform jutting out from the tallest tower, looking down at a straight drop to rocky mountainside. He runs through all the calibrations necessary. The vent plates shift an adjust, check. Check, check, check check check. Every joint moves well, as well as can be expected while standing. Temperature control, plate motion, etc. etc. etc. JARVIS’s voice in his ear is warm and familiar. All the wiring he did seems to have paid off. Which, duh. He expected it to. He’s run a gauntlet of tests on the individual pieces in his workshop, but today is- well. It’s kind of the first time he’s put his armor fully on in what feels like an eternity.

The faceplate flips up, and he turns around. Frigga, Loki, the two kings, Morgan, and a handful of other people he doesn’t know are all watching expectantly. Theoretically everything should work. It’s just a matter of turning theory into reality.

“Hey, Loki,” he calls. Loki fixes him with an unimpressed glare, but he comes forwards anyways.

“What do you need, pet?” the prince drawls. “Having second thoughts?”

“Good luck kiss?” he ventures hopefully. Loki rolls his eyes, like Tony is asking him to do some horrendous task. Tony makes kissy noises at him.

“Oh Norns, you’re such a man-child.”

Loki leans forwards anyways and gives Tony what he asks for. A gentle, chaste kiss, but Tony’s a little shit, so he chooses that exact moment to kick the repulsors into high gear. He shoots back and away from Loki, the faceplate snapping into place, and he lets out a whoop as the armor holds him, responds to his every move. The last time he’d been in the suit, he hadn’t exactly had a chance to just revel in the exhilaration. He twists, spiraling up through the air, and lets the repulsors cut out in a freefall. They kick back in when he nears the tower again, and he circles the structure, shining in the light. On his second round, though, Loki’s gone. Like, just gone. He stills to look more closely, stabilizing himself in the air. Frigga waves at him, and he shifts his weight to wave back. Only to be knocked out of balance almost immediately by something large, scaly, and altogether unexpected. It hits him from below, sending him tumbling before he rights himself again. Tony’s first instinct is to put himself between the spectators and the thing- dragon? It’s definitely much smaller than Elder, with a wingspan of maybe 30 feet and emerald green scales. And hang on, that little shit.

It’s Loki.

The two of them face, Loki twisting his wings to hover.

“Attention whore,” Tony projects, prompting a lizardy grin-type expression from the shapeshifter. “Race you.”

Tony blasts away, eyes flicking over the HUD. Systems seem fine. He’s maintaining altitude and acceleration well. He twists over onto his back and sees Loki rocketing after him, his membranous wings pumping. Tony lets the Loki-dragon catch up, and they fly. There’s not, not really a destination. Just- going. He stretches out an arm to touch the scales, and Loki looks down at him,
huffing a growly noise. Tony grins behind his helmet and kicks off again. They race over the mountains, Tony mostly in the lead, until Loki wraps his claws around the metal body and plummets downward, accompanied by Tony’s squawking protest. Loki throws him to the ground in a meadow, and the armor digs a furrow in the grassy earth until he comes to a stop. Tony groans and gets up, finding his footing with the help of the suit stabilizing him.

“What the fuck,” he complains, flipping up the faceplate again. Loki settles onto the ground in front of him and tucks his wings in, and it occurs to Tony now that Loki only has two legs, rather than four like Elder. Loki chortles in his throat and shrinks back down to size. Scales recede, and the wings condense into hands and arms, and before long Loki stands before him, just as he always is.

“What the fuck” Loki snips at him.

Tony examines his limbs, grimacing at all the dirt and grass he’s going to have to detail out. By hand.

“That’s no reason to throw me out of the goddamn sky, Lo. And since when can you turn into a dragon?”

“Oh no, Tony. Do not ever let Elder hear you calling a wyvern a dragon if you value your skin.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Wyverns are flying lizards. Dragons are an ancient race.”

Tony rolls his eyes. This coming from the guy who called Elder a ‘beast’.

“Alright, mister ‘I know everything’. What was the point of turning me into a human crater?”

Loki grins that thin, lopsided grin of his that’s all teeth. He produces from nowhere (‘A pocket dimension, Tony’, as if that’s not a big deal) a goddamn picnic basket of all things. A picnic basket. Like that’s any reason to send Tony careening into the dirt. A simple ‘Hey Tony, wanna be a sappy romance movie couple and have lunch by the crater I dug with your body?’ would suffice.

“You take things to the extreme, you know? Fine. But you’re setting everything up. I have wounds to nurse thanks to you.”

“Yes, like your ego.”

Tony carefully extracts himself from the armor. He thinks maybe he should design the next one so that it opens in the front so he can just step out. Or maybe in the back so he can just walk into it, rather than having to take it apart one plate at a time. When the armor is mostly-dismantled and Tony walks free, Loki has a blanket- an honest to god blanket- spread out on the grass.

Lunch is nice. The conversation is good too. Mostly they verbally spar. Tony relates lessons he’s learned from Elder. A lot of them are basic, but there are in fact a few things Loki hasn’t ever heard of, and Tony takes delight in flaunting his new skills. He knows it still rankles the prince to know his teaching skills are ‘subpar’.

Tony puts the suit back on when night falls, and together he and Loki fly back to the palace. Blackbirds follow them part of the way, but so long as they don’t end up as fried crow due to his repulsors, he’s happy. Frigga is there waiting for them upon their return, and they spend the last of their time in the Southern Kingdom together. Like a weird little family. A mom, a son, and that friend no one wants to say no to despite him not really belonging.
The trip is… peaceful. It’s enjoyable, calming. Tony does end up getting to see a nilfbald in the wild (no hunting involved), and yeah, they’re cool. Like a unicorn, but more… burly. Burly is a good word. The bear of unicorns. Herbivorous bear.

So yeah, he does put the gifted horn on display in his workshop when he returns. It’s a weird present, but it makes something in his empty chest feel all warm when he looks at it.

Chapter End Notes

Guys, I just checked my outline. One more chapter before things get a little more difficult for the boys.

I work for kudos and comments! Please, bestow them upon me, let me know if you like it <3
Thor loses his hammer.

Well, loses is a strong word.

Stolen is more like it. Stolen, while fall-down drunk, after challenging a daisy-yellow alien to a drinking contest.

Of course, this was all a story. Not the stolen hammer thing, but the drunk thing. Maybe it happened. Tony doesn’t know. He wasn’t there, and neither was Loki.

Who is currently missing.

Odin is pissed, because apparently Volund is a family heirloom. Who makes a hammer a family heirloom? Whatever. Thor is cowed, but also kind of pissed. Mostly at himself. The Warriors Three and Sif try to console him, but, uh, he’s really earning his ‘god of thunder’ title. The skies outside flash with lightning, and rain is coming down in buckets.

Tony leaves for his lessons with Elder, but when he comes back the sky is still black and purple with clouds that extend past Asgard’s edge. He’s sopping wet by the time he makes it back into the palace, and that is when Loki finally makes an appearance.

“Tony, finally,” he gripes. The prince’s long fingers dig into his sleeve, and he’s pulled along.

“Woah, woah, woah, slow down, princess. Where are we going?”

“To speak with father. I believe I know where Volund is.”

“And you had to wait for me for that?”

Loki stops and looks down at Tony, chewing on his cheek, before he finally admits, “I don’t like facing him alone.”

And okay, yeah. Tony can get on board with that.

“Well then let’s hop to it. To the cyclops!”

Mercel, the bronze-statue bitch, is lounging on the throne’s arm again, draping an arm possessively over one of Odin’s shoulders, but they have to ignore her. She might hold Odin’s ear, but most of the Asgardian nobility firmly believe that their king remains wise and in control of his own actions. Tony hopes they’re right.

Loki bows and relates what he has learned. Apparently there’s a giant chieftain named Thrym, the head of a giant clan. And in Tony’s mind, this means a very large king, who rules over a very large clan of very large families. Nope. Loki, he learns, means an actual giant, ruling over an actual clan of giant families of giants. Okay. He can accept this. He’s learning magic from a dragon. Giants aren’t out of the realm of possibility.

Anyways, Thrym has Volund.
Odin sends Loki away, demanding he be useful and return to Thrym to ask after the return of the hammer. Tony leaves his little puddle of dripped rainwater and drip drip drips on his way out. It’s not like he can control the way the water in his clothes obeys the pull of gravity, but he can’t help but feel a sort of satisfaction at dripping on Odin’s floor. He demands Loki wait for him to change into dry clothes before they (yes, they. Tony still doesn’t like letting Loki go on adventures alone, after the whole golden thread incident) return, but the moment Tony turns his back, Loki flits away with a flash of green light. Figures.

“Bastard,” he grumbles.

Loki returns again several hours later, looking decidedly displeased. Tony’s been roped into eating with Thor and his pals, which he isn’t exactly fond of. It’s not that he dislikes any of them separately, but all together they’re kind of difficult to handle. Rather than going to Odin, Loki comes straight to them.

“Oh thank god,” Tony groans when he sees his rescuer. Loki, however, has this pinched look on his face.

“Well, brother? What tidings do you bring?” Thor booms.

“Not the best ones, I’m afraid. Thrym has said that he will return Volund, if. We give him Freyja as his bride. Now, I think- Thor. Thor wait. No, sit down, you’re going to get yourself- oh why do I bother.”

Thor gets up with a big grin on his face.

“Then Freyja is to be married!”

Freyja, however, does not want to be married. She is awesome to watch, though. When Thor bursts into her private room announcing, “Come Freyja! Put on your finest dress! You are to be married!” she levels him with a flat, unimpressed look, winds back, and punches him square on the mouth. Big, beefcake Thor stumbles back, clutching his bloody lip.

“What is she goddess of again?” Tony whispers from where he and Loki are watching in the doorway.

“Among other things, love, beauty- and war,” Loki replies, resigned.

“Freyja, you must understand-” Thor begs, but Freyja points to the door.

“I must understand nothing. Leave.”

She turns her back, sweeping away towards a window where two massive cats lounge. Thor trundles forwards and grabs her by the arm, but Freyja is Not Having any of that. She cuffs the prince on the ear and grabs him by the hair, steering him bodily out of the room.

Thor is shoved out into the hall, where he lands with a groan. Freyja leans in the doorway, and Loki and Tony both take a step back. Freyja brushes her ruler-straight hair out of her face, looking down her nose at Thor, before she puts on a dazzling smile for Loki.

“Hello Loki,” she greets, as if she’s only just noticed the other prince.

“Hello Freyja,” Loki replies, just as casually.

“Sigyn says hello.”
“Let her know I return the regards, and I hope she’s doing well.”

“Of course.”

She casts another glare down at Thor, before slamming the door.

“So who’s Sigyn?”

“She was once my wife. We split long ago, and she now resides in the mountains of Asgard’s far edge. An herbalist, you see. Eir makes use of her samples frequently.”

“Ah.”

They help Thor up, and the ginger wipes blood from his chin.

“Hel’s bells, she is strong.”

“Well what did you expect, Thor? She rides before the valkyries.”

Tony’s still just trying to process the idea of Loki being married. Huh. He figured maybe that would have come up by now, but nope. He isn’t mad, or jealous. Just kind of curious.

But now is not the time.

“So now what? Since that magnificent plan failed?” Tony asks.

“I don’t know yet. Let me think.”

It takes another week before any headway is made. People are starting to get antsy. Apparently Volund is ancient, passed down from father to son for generations, all the way back to the very first king of Asgard. Tony can’t get any info on exactly how long ago that was, but a long time. A very, very long time. Odin especially is getting pissed, mainly at Loki, which isn’t fair. Tony blames Mercel. She’s the one constantly whispering into Odin’s ear, constantly touching him. And she doesn’t exactly like the rest of Odin’s family. So yeah, he can see her picking them off one by one, ostracizing them all from the king. Loki, the black sheep of the family, is the easy target. As a result of his father’s pressure, Loki throws himself into finding a way to get the hammer back.

It apparently has a unique magical signature. Can they track it? Uh… no dice. What if they attack the giants? Apparently that would start an interplanetary war. Hmm.

Heimdall, however, is the one with the answers. Tony wasn’t aware the massive man could leave his little gold sphere in the stars. He had thought maybe he was bound to the bifrost like his sister was bound to her gardens. Nonetheless, when he comes back from visiting Elder, Heimdall walks with him. When Loki inevitably shows up to greet Tony, Heimdall is there to turn over his plan.

A sly grin overtakes Loki’s face.

The three of them collect Thor, and although Heimdall returns to his post, the rest of them return to Freyja, who still adamantly refuses to marry a Jotun just so Thor can get his family heirloom back. Loki knocks on her door, and it swings open.

“What?” the goddess within sighs in the way of someone who is trying to be patient. And of one who is very close to losing her patience.

“We need a dress. And the brisingamen. And maybe your cats.”
Freyja looks at Loki like he’s gone mad, but she lets them into her room anyways. By the time Loki’s finished explaining the plan, though, she’s outright grinning. Thor, however, looks decidedly apprehensive.

“Why must I be the one to wear the dress?” he moans. “Tony has a more womanly figure than I.”

Tony hisses like one of the two truly massive cats lounging around.

“You must wear the dress because your figure is closer to mine,” Freyja explains, already looking through her closet. “The dress may hang loose, but I’m sure we can fix that, can’t we?”

Freyja isn’t a Victoria’s Secret model. She’s got soft size and fierce strength and really, it’s no wonder she’s the goddess of both love and war. It also, however, means her dresses will fit Thor. They wrangle Thor into a dress composed of a white skirt and red bodice, with plenty of extra white fabric hanging from the elbows down. Tony is in charge of brushing Thor’s hair, and it’s not as pleasant a task as brushing Loki’s hair. For one thing, he’s not sleeping with Thor, and grooming feels really uncomfortably intimate. For another, Thor is obviously Not Happy about any of this, and Tony is painfully aware that the thunder god could snap him in half if he wanted.

Still, they get Thor primped and preened. Freyja smacks Tony’s hands away and takes over the hair to weave an intricate braid decorated with gold flowers. Loki drapes a veil over Thor’s head, and he looks- uh, passable. Tony thinks maybe they’re all banking on the groom-to-be having never actually seen Freyja before. Freyja won’t give up her ‘brisingamen’, but she does ‘gift’ Thor with another set of bangles and necklaces from her collection to complete the costume. The cats are a no-go as well, but hey. They’ve got a bride. Loki transforms himself into a more, uh, feminine version of himself. Not even ‘more feminine’ works. He’s a woman, now. Breasts and all. Tony doesn’t know if he’s going to get the chance to see how far that transformation goes, but he does snag Loki by the waist as they file out of Freyja’s room, and he presses a quick kiss to the prince’s cheek. Loki is Loki, and he lo- strongly likes Loki. Strongly likes.

“Told you you’d be gorgeous,” he teases. Lady-Loki looks at Tony like he’s grown a second head, but he shakes his head, curly black hair bobbing around his face.

“Go fetch Dave,” Loki orders. Tony furrows his brow.

“Dave? Why?”

“Trust me, Tony. We should bring Dave.”

And that’s that, isn’t it? Loki asks Tony to trust him, and naturally, Tony does. He’s still confused as all fuck, but while Freyja and Loki put the finishing touches on Thor’s costume, Tony tears through the halls and bursts into the crows’ garden.

“Hey Dave!” he calls, and a throaty caw answers him as Dave drops from a tree and glides towards him. That bird is smart. Tony doesn’t know whether it’s all crows or just these, but Dave knows her name, she knows Tony’s schedule, she knows how to get into his workshop, she knows. And it’s both impressive and unsettling. His face is buffeted by stiff flight feathers as she settles down on his shoulder and runs her beak through his hair.

“Good girl, Dave.” She’s fully-feathered now, no longer resembling the black puffball he found on the ground. That little patch of white above her eye is still stubbornly there, making her look like she’s constantly skeptical.

Tony returns to Loki, Thor, and the Lady Freyja, running his fingers through Dave’s black feathers.
as she nips his ear. Freyja stands with her arms crossed, eying Thor critically.

“Why can you not simply cast an illusion?” Thor gripes, glaring down at the dress as Loki affixes a set of keys to a sash around his elder brother’s waist.

“Because Thrym will see the aura of magic on you. He will see through our trick immediately if we provide him the window. No illusion. You must be what you are.”

Which maybe says something about Loki’s shapeshifting, but Tony doesn’t comment.

Loki summons a bouquet and forces it into Thor’s hands, and then, having mercy on Thor, teleports the three (four with Dave) of them to the bifrost’s oculus.

Heimdal, bless him, doesn’t say a word about the odd trio they make. Thor glares at the gatekeeper and gropes at the bunched-up fabric playing the part of his false ‘breasts’, trying to adjust them, but Loki slaps his hands away.

“You are the Lady Freyja now,” he hisses. “Act like it.”

Tony’s part to play is that of a manservant. Loki is to play the chaperone, the handmaiden who ensures proper behavior until the wedding takes place. Thor- well. He’s the blushing bride.

The bifrost sets them down on a seashore. White sand, balmy weather- Yeah. Tony likes this place.

What he likes a little less is the trio of fucking 20-foot-tall men loping towards them. Maybe, maybe he’s insecure about his height. Being confronted with honest-to-god giants isn’t really helping.

“Do you think they’ll notice?” Thor mutters behind his nearly opaque veil, the flowers clutched tightly in his meaty fists.

Loki waves an elegant hand.

“You look fine,” he hisses back. Tony bites his lip to keep from cracking a smile.

“Do not speak of this to anyone.”

“Oh Thor. Everyone is going to hear of this.”

Thor isn’t given any time to snap back, though, because the giants are within earshot now. He settles for digging the toe of one shoe into the sand.

Loki steps forward and lifts a hand, chin up and head held proud.

“Hail Thrym, Lord of Giants!”

One of the giants steps forwards and mimics the gesture.

“Hail, handmaiden to Freyja. Hail Freyja, Lady of War and Love.” The green-skinned giant peers down at Tony, unsure how to ‘hail’ him.

“I’m just here for the hammer,” Tony supplies, earning a sharp look from Loki. Yeah, he had a specific role set out, but Tony isn’t exactly the guy you go to about propriety.

“Hail, retriever of Volund,” is what he gets in return.
Tony is fascinated by the giant’s skin. It’s this kind of leafy green, and covered in slightly-raised, darker-green markings. Thinner lines swoop over his face and around his fingers. Thicker ones shoot out over his knees and around his arms. It’s badass, is what it is.

“Run ahead, brothers,” the giant—Thrym—announces. “Tell the others to lay straw on the benches and slaughter beasts for the feast. They bring the Lady Freyja, daughter of Njord and Noatun, to be my wife. I have oxen of black and gold grazing in my pastures; I have treasure and riches aplenty, and yet Freyja is the only thing I lack. No more, my brothers!”

While the two other giants sprint back, Thrym takes smaller, more measured steps as Tony, Loki, and ‘Freyja’ follow alongside.

“Lord of Giants,” Loki simpers, laying it on thick. “Oh wondrous Thrym, the excitement has left my lady exhausted.” Dave churrs in Tony’s ear. If he didn’t know any better, he’d think the bird was laughing. “Might we have a private room in which to rest? We must ensure the Lady Freyja is at her best for the wedding night.”

“Of course,” the giant gruffs, looking down at his supposed bride to be. Thor forces out a high-pitched giggling sound that Tony never wants to hear again, but Thrym seems satisfied.

They are led to what is basically a long log building. Through the massive doors is a long, high hall, with several slightly-smaller doors leading off into other offshooting rooms. The trio of tricksters is escorted by the dashing groom to a large (par for the course) room with a rather tall table and blanket-covered stacks of hay. Beds, apparently. Or couches. Whatever. A reedy giantess is sent in shortly after, to see to their needs. Loki requests water and small cups. The three of them stand there, behind closed doors for a moment, before Tony bursts out laughing. Loki swiftly follows, and Thor can’t help but join in as well.

“Oh—Oh—Oh fucking christ,” Tony cackles. “They didn’t notice a thing!”

“Congratulations, Thor,” Loki casts out. “You are to be wed! Now, how many children are expecting?”

Thor’s booming chuckles echo in Tony’s ears as he lifts up the veil, a grin on his face.

“I do not know, Loki. Children are your domain, not mine.”

Loki smacks Thor’s hand away, letting the veil fall back in place.

“Well, I certainly do make quite the parent, don’t I?”

Thor settles carefully down on the straw furniture-pile, while Loki goes to stand by the door as laughter dies down. Tony still has a grin on his face, but he leans against the wall, Dave on one arm.

“I didn’t actually realize you really have kids, Lo. I haven’t seen any of them around. How many do you have?”

A wistful smile finds its way onto Loki’s thin lips, and he smooths the apron of the dress he’s wearing.

“Five sons and a girl,” he sighs, almost dreamy. “I miss them every day.”

Thor clears his throat, flipping up the veil again.
“Four sons, and two girls,” he corrects. The smile vanishes from Loki’s face in the span of a heartbeat.

“Jormungandr is my son,” the trickster replies sharply, and uh oh. Tony gets the feeling he just opened up an old family argument.

“Loki,” Thor sighs. “She cannot be anything but what she is. Playing into her delusions will only hurt her.”

Loki grinds the pad of his thumb into the meat of his palm again, rubbing viciously at the skin there. Tony gravitates towards Loki. He’s always afraid that nervous habit is going to end up tearing Loki’s palm.

“Who are you to say what he is and is not?” And oh, but Loki is angry now. Tony touches Loki’s shoulder gingerly, but the prince stalks towards his brother. “That you and the rest of our people fail to understand him does not make him delusional.”

Thor props himself up on one elbow, grimacing.

“This is why Father sent her away, brother. She needs to learn to be happy as she is, without you insisting that she isn’t your daughter.”

A wounded sound leaves Loki’s throat, and his fingers strain into tight almost-fists. He looks livid.

“Jormungandr will always be mine. Don’t you dare say otherwise. An dyou know. You know almost all my children were taken from me, sent away beyond my reach, because Father feared they were monsters.” He paces, agitated, and flexes his fingers sharply. “This has nothing to do with Jormungandr being my son.”

“It’s unnatural, brother. To make believe at being a man, or a woman for that matter, when you are clearly not? It isn’t healthy.”

Loki rounds on Thor again, looking for all the world like he wants to hit Thor, fight him, scream at him, do something. Instead he bites his tongue, shakes his head, and heads for the door. Tony makes to go after him, but Dave decides to be a pain in the ass and buffet his face with her wings, shoving her feet against his nose.

“Hey, what the ever-loving fuck?”

He gets a hand up to push Dave away, but by the time the crow settles down again, grumbling deep in her throat, Loki is nowhere to be seen.

“What see what you did? Uh, Thor, buddy, pal, big-guy? Can you just, um, pretend to be asleep or something? I’m going to go find Loki.”

“Have you so little faith in my feminine mimicry?”

“Uh, no. No way. You’re doing fine.”

In truth, Tony’s kind of- well. He feels a little- more than a little- a lot, actually. A lot uncomfortable. And he’s a coward, isn’t he. That’s the thought that makes him sick to his stomach. That he doesn’t know how- that he was too much of a coward to stick up for Loki, to help him defend his son. Maybe defend Loki too. Tony doesn’t know.

But Loki is nowhere to be found, and he hates the hotheavysour curl of loathing in his gut. He
really let his friend down, didn’t he?

“Alright you little brat,” he grumbles to Dave. She cocks her head and clicks her beak, staring up at him curiously. “You find Loki. None of this ‘he needs time’ bullshit. I need to make sure he’s fine.”

He tosses Dave upwards, feeling a little thrill at the motion. Like he’s ye-old-bird-guy, sending his messenger away. The thrill is deadened by the guilt, though, and he swallows around the lump in his throat, sneaking through the giants readying the hall for a feast, until finally he slips out the open door. Dave made her escape through an open window near the ceiling.

His boots don’t find anything in the way of good purchase in the loose white sand, so he stumbles a bit, but he keeps an eye out for Dave. He hopes Loki just bolted, didn’t teleport away or anything. Elder’s gotten him started on the basics of teleportation now, but something isn’t clicking. Like he’s looking through an unfocused lense. Like there’s something important he’s missing. The point is, he can’t follow if Loki teleported himself far away.

But Dave comes flapping in towards him, drops down to snatch gently at his hair to get his attention, and flaps back up again. Tony follows her, and she doubles back every now and then to avoid completely outpacing him. Tony moves down the beach to walk on wave-packed sand, the dunes to his left, the ocean to his right.

He finds Loki sitting in the sand, arms crossed over his knees, up near the dunes. Dave lands on the sand beside Loki and hops closer, clicking her beak. Loki glances down at her and offers an arm for her to clamber onto.

“Hello darling,” he murmurs, stroking her feathers. Tony clasps his hands in front of himself and rocks on his heels, before fixing on a smile and sauntering over to join them. He plops down in the sand beside Loki.

“Hello to you too, babe.”

“I wasn’t talking to you.”

The words are said without heat, but there’s something blank and hurt in Loki’s eyes. For all he’s called the Liesmith, his eyes are expressive beyond belief, when he doesn’t have his walls up.

“I know; it was a joke, Lo.” Loki doesn’t say anything in response, so Tony takes it upon himself to fill the silence. “She’s as good as a bloodhound for tracking, you know? Weird. I didn’t think crows were trainable. I mean, no one’s even actually trained her, far as I’m aware. She can’t be normal. Is she? Are all Asgardian birds so freakishly smart?”

“Would you be silent for one moment?” Loki hisses, hunching his shoulders. Tony’s mouth snaps shut with a click of teeth.

He fidgets in the sand, and on impulse lays his hand palm-up on his own knee. Loki looks down at it, then back out at the rolling waves. His hand sneaks down into Tony’s a moment later, though. The itch of sand caught between their fingers is annoying and plucking at Tony’s senses, but he can manage. Just like he can manage silence. Which he does. Really. He stays quiet for a while, until the sun starts to dip below the earth behind them, the sky over the ocean darkening as it does.

“Jormungandr is my son,” Loki whispers, finally. Dave gets up onto her feet and runs her beak gently over Loki’s face.

“I know. Thor’s just being a dick.”
“So you say, but by your way of thinking, the entirety of Asgard is in the wrong.” Loki wets his lips and folds an arm protectively across his rather feminine chest. “An entire kingdom, surely, knows the truth of matters.”

“Not always, I don’t think.”

Tony Stark is not a man of inspiring words. If he has them, they’re pirated from someone else. So yeah, he doesn’t have a speech prepared. He doesn’t have anything to say.

Loki continues in a different vein, though.

“Why am I cursed to lose my children?” He tucks a loose lock of hair behind his ear, unwilling to look at Tony. “Sleipnir I lost to Odin. He, I think, is satisfied where he is, but I may not see to him. My girl, my little Hela, she was called to the realm of the dead, to tend them and rule them. Fenrir, he—” Loki chokes a little. “He is trapped. Laid low and imprisoned for a wager he made as a child. Jormungandr too was stolen from me, labeled dangerous and cast to the seas of Midgard. Odin’s magic prevents me from finding him on my own.”

Tony sits quietly, looking out at the sea as well. It’s a rare moment of vulnerability, a look behind the careful persona Loki’s crafted for himself. He isn’t just a prince, he’s a father. And Tony knows Loki by now. He knows he’s not the kind of father that Howard was.

“The other two I will not speak of. I don’t— Tony, I miss them.”

Tony runs his thumb over the hand joined with his.

“Thanks for telling me, Lo,” he says quietly. Loki huffs a laugh.

“What in the nine realms are you thanking me for? For casting my misery onto you? For overreacting to the mindset of Asgard? For running away, like a coward? Like one unmanned?”

“For letting me in.”

Loki looks down the beach, away from Tony.

“It hardly makes a difference.”

“Look, princess. Take it from someone who’s a professional at the whole ‘lone wolf’ thing. It’s a hell of a lot easier to take the shit the world- uh, worlds- throw at you when there’s someone at your back. Believe me. I know. It makes a difference.”

Loki squirms just a little bit, pressing his side against Tony’s.

When Tony’s knees start feeling stiff, when he thinks his ass is going to fall asleep from staying in the same weird position for so long, Loki rocks lithely to his feet, leaving Tony to nearly fall over in the sand.

“We should return, Loki says decisively, his walls right back up. He brushes the sand off of his dress, and Tony clambers up too. Dave settles down on Tony’s shoulder and scratches her head against his chin. He could almost convince himself it was a nuzzle.

Loki does teleport them, this time to the dunes near the entrance to the giant’s lodge. When they approach, the sound of laughing and singing and general deep chatter wafts out to meet them. Which means… Whoops. The feast already started.
They enter the lodge to see Thrym staring at Thor, who still wears his veil and dress, thank god. A pile of bones sits in front of Thor, and he’s currently in the process of draining a tankard of something, probably alcoholic.

“Have you ever seen a bride eat and drink so heartily?” Thrym announces, perplexed. Loki grimaces and hurries up to the table on its dais, Tony close behind. There’s a tense moment when it seems like Loki might not come to Thor’s rescue, just to spite him, but he sighs and relents.

“Freyja was so eager to arrive that she fasted for seven days and seven nights, my lord,” Loki calls, bowing shortly in front of the giant. Thrym doesn’t look entirely convinced, but allows the excuse.

Tony knows they’re in some dangerous territory now. He and Loki are helped up to what are basically booster seats, so they can sit at the table with all the giants. Loki listens in to Thrym like some kind of owl, ready to swoop in and intervene at a moment’s notice. When the giant bends over to lift Thor’s veil and kiss him, though, Thrym jerks back with a start.

“Why are Freyja's eyes so fearful?” he says. "I think that fire is burning in her eyes."

Loki leans over and calmly replies, “Oh, the Lady Freyja was so eager to arrive that she hasn’t even slept. Not for a week!”

Thrym takes this too, and smiles down at Thor. After a little while, their gracious host gets up and wanders off. An older giantess with silver hair makes her way around to Thor and places her hand on the table, leaning over the disguised prince.

“I am Thrym’s sister, Lady Freyja,” she simpers. “Give me those bangles on your arms, if you want my love and friendship.”

“Maybe after the wedding,” Thor deflects in his painfully high-pitched voice.

Thrym returns shortly, and Thor immediately sharpens at the sight of the hammer.

“Jotunar! Take heed!” Thrym roars, lifting the hammer between his fingers. The giants quiet down and turn their attention to their leader. “Tonight marks the union of your lord and the Lady Freyja, most beautiful of goddesses! With this hammer, the hammer of fertile Thor, I bless our union.”

Tony chokes on his drink. ‘Fertile Thor’ isn’t something he wants to hear again.

The hammer is laid in Thor’s lap, and immediately the prince takes hold of its handle and leaps to his feet, tearing off the veil. Loki rises with him, grasping Thor around the arm as the giants stare in shock.

“Thor, you have your hammer,” Loki urges. “Let us leave.”

“Nay, brother. Thrym and his people have delivered a slight I cannot ignore!”

Thor leaps at Thrym, and despite the size difference, all it takes is one crack of the hammer to cave the giant’s head in. Everything erupts into pandemonium, and Tony can’t do much but stand frozen in shock. This is wrong. This is wrong. It’s- it’s- murder. Vengeance taken to the extreme. Loki whirls on him and wraps his arms around Tony. Tony flinches violently, immediately trying to struggle free, but Loki’s arms are like steel bands. There’s a pop of green, and then they’re out on the beach again. Tony falls to his knees when Loki lets him go, and he’s- he’s- he’s shaking. He digs his fingers into the sand to make his hands go still and shakes his head, trying to rattle the haze free.
“He’s gonna kill ‘em all,” Tony rasps, struggling for breath. “He’s- christ, we’ve gotta stop him.”

Loki kneels beside him, and Tony flinches away again when the prince tries to lay a hand on his shoulder.

“Believe me, Tony. Neither of us is currently prepared to stand against Thor on a rampage.”

“But your- your magic. You could stop him, right?”

He looks up at Loki, and hates how small his voice is.

“That is a line I do not cross, Tony,” the prince says softly. “I will not take control of anyone. Never. I won’t take away free will, even if that will is used destructively.”

Tony rolls over to sit, mirroring the way Loki sat with his knees against his chest not long ago. Okay, yeah. He can see where Loki is coming from.

That doesn’t mean he has to like it.

“Besides,” Loki continues. “They are only jotuns, only monsters. The realms will not miss them.”

Tony’s head jerks up in bitter surprise.

“Are you fucking kidding me? I thought you were just getting all pissed because your kids were taken away for being monsters. Now you’re saying you think those people in there are allowed to just be murdered because they’re monsters?”

“This is different,” Loki hisses.

“How? Tell me how.”

“Because my children were mine. They never hurt anyone. These- these jotuns, they have invaded worlds, they have raped, pillaged, burned, destroyed. I will not cry for them.”

“Unbelievable. Un-fucking-believable. Yeah, sure. Maybe they’re monsters, but they don’t deserve to be slaughtered.”

“You do not know them as we do. We have fought wars, long, bloody wars against their viciousness. Believe me, Tony. Trust me when I say the worlds will be better without them.”

Tony thinks, maybe, that he’s not ready to trust Loki on this one. ALmost everything else, maybe. But not on this. It had been easy to accept Loki’s indictment of the giants as nothing more than fairy tale monsters, when it had just been stories. But now Tony’s seen them. And they’re just people. People who apparently think stealing a family heirloom to coerce a woman into marriage is okay, but yeah, everyone’s a little fucked up, right?

“I think I’m gonna trust myself on this one, no offense.”

Thor comes back to them hours later, the dress absolutely ruined. He’s grinning, brimming with pride. Tony doesn’t want to look at him. He presses Dave to his face, and the bird tugs at his hair, churring in her chest.

They’re sucked back up the rainbow road, and as soon as he can, Tony goes to Unnur. Loki is absolutely not thrilled that he’s being avoided, but he lets Tony go without a fight. Dave sticks around on his shoulder, and despite the fact that it’s dark out, Unnur lets him in.
Tony won’t explain why he’s in such a foul mood, but then again, he doesn’t have to. Unnur points him to a cool forge, and he turns on the power, leaving it to heat.

“We had an argument,” is what he tells her when he’s rummaging through scrap. ‘We’ is pretty self-explanatory. Or at least, Unnur doesn’t ask for clarification.

“Can you forgive each other?”

“I don’t know.”

He does, though. They dance around each other, avoid each other for nearly a week, but in the end, with tempers cooled and tired eyes, they huddle together. The apologies they offer come as easily as pulling teeth, but hey, at least they apologize. It’s agreed, that they won’t talk about jotuns unless needed. Which still feels shitty to do, but hey, he needs time to work on Loki’s view. He’s pretty sure Loki’s just parroting what he’s heard all his life. That’s easier to change than a self-chosen belief.

But not yet. For now, Tony doesn’t want to rock the boat. He’s still nurturing that warm glowy feeling of being gifted with the knowledge of Loki’s kids. He doesn’t want to mar that with any more arguments until it has a chance to settle in.

Loki marches into Tony’s workshop a few days later. Tony, admittedly, is distracted at the moment, tinkering with a wrist-cuff thing on his worktop. He’s in the process of adapting Asgardian tech to house JARVIS. It’s all well and good having his creation with him when he’s in the suit, but Tony is much more used to having the AI with him at all times, whether in the walls or on his phone or in his watch. He wants that constant connection back. Tony glances up from his work for maybe half a second before looking down again.

“Hey, babe,” Tony calls absently, painting a symbol into the casing with a brush maybe the width of a very fine hair.

“Tony.”

“Mmm?”

He tries to pay attention, he really does, but come on. He’s on the verge of a breakthrough here. Once he stopped treating JARVIS as code and started conceptualizing him as a bodiless entity, new doors had opened up in the pursuit of giving him a home in Asgardian tech. Magical doors. Doors pointed out by Elder.

“Tony,” Loki hisses again, and okay, he sounds strained. Tony puts down the casing and turns in his swivel chair to see Lady Loki again. Loki looks tense and ready to bolt. Tony does his best to put on a non-threatening face. “I am a woman today.”

Loki delivers this bit of news like it holds all the weight in the world, and Tony can see his companion nearly holding her breath, waiting for him to respond.

“Okay, cool.”

In his defense, Tony doesn’t know what else to say. Does he make a big deal over this? Does he move on? Everyone needs a different reaction when they come out, in his limited experience. He doesn’t know what Loki needs.

“Okay cool”? That’s- that’s it?”
Tony shrugs, scrubbing a hand through his messy brown hair.

“Uh, I think so. Unless, you know, there’s something else you need to hear? Like, do I call you a she like this? Do you want to stick with ‘Loki’ as your name? Should I avoid mentioning it in public, or do you want to have everyone know? I mean, you’re you, no matter what, so, you know.”

“That cannot- Tony, I’m a freak,” Loki whispers. “And yet you say ‘okay’?”

“Oh, babydoll, no. No, princess. Come here.”

Touch. Touch is okay right now, he thinks, so Tony holds open his arms for Loki, and she creeps forward, tentative as a child expecting rebuke. Tony very slowly reaches out to cup her face. She doesn’t look quite as sharp, as angular like this, but she’s Loki, and that’s- that’s what matters, to Tony.

“You should’ve been born on Earth, I swear. It’s not great for trans people there either, but in some places it’s a hell of a lot better than here. At least on Earth we were trying to normalize it.”

Tony draws away from Loki to shove the clutter on his workbench aside, and he hops up to sit on the flat surface, patting the space beside him. Loki joins him, wrapping her arm around Tony’s waist. Tony stiffens at that touch, but he takes a breath, tries to calm himself. He’s safe with Loki. He doesn’t need to ruin the moment by panicking. Loki must have been terrified.

“You really don’t mind,” Loki whispers flatly.

“Yeah, no. No I don’t. So long as you’re Loki, we’re good. Now if you became Thor, then- then maybe we would have an issue. He’s not really my type, you know? But you’re my princess, man or woman or whatever. You know yourself better than anyone. If you’re a woman, then you’re a woman.”

Tony knows there are people who would kill to be able to transform their appearance to fit the insides like Loki can, but he doesn’t think it’s a prerequisite to being the gender they say they are.

“I trust you, but I do not believe you,” Loki allows, quiet. “I want to, but I cannot.”

“That’s fine. I mean, you’re how old?”

“Seven hundred and thirty five.”

“Fuck, you’re practically robbing the cradle with me.”

“Are you calling me old, Stark?”

“Me? No, never.” He hurries on. “What I mean is- and this was taught to me by one of my best friends, alright? He took the spoiled rich white boy under his wing and taught me how not to be an ass when I could help it, okay? And we were talking about race, but I think it works here too. You grow up being told one thing, day in day out, both implicitly and explicitly, to your face or behind your back, and that’s what you’re going to believe. That doesn’t make it true.” Tony poke’s Loki’s bony shoulder. “You have to figure out what’s true. Listen to people who know what they’re talking about, and-”
“Like you?”

“Don’t interrupt. No, not like me. I’m just parroting what someone who did know what he was talking about said. Anyways, listen to people who know what’s they’re talking about, and ignore the people who talk out of their asses and decide they know everything about something they’ve never experienced. There. I’m done now. I think that’s about as much as my cold, metallic heart can take of that mushy stuff.” He tries to deflect away, suddenly self-conscious. He brought up Rhodey, for christ’s sake.

Loki hmms without any sort of commitment and leans her head on Tony’s shoulder. The height difference between them means it can’t be comfortable, and yet, Loki does it all the goddamn time. Almost as much as Tony does the same gesture. It’s just more comfortable when Tony does it.

Finally, much to Tony’s relief, Loki moves on to asking Tony questions. What’s this, what do you intend to do with that, surely not that sounds horrid, how does this work. You know. Usual stuff. Tony seizes on the way out and animatedly explains his little doodads, takes delight in showing Loki the improved schematics for the Mark III B. There’s a boat- and now he knows what Unnur meant by boat when he was helping her to a clinic. Asgardians don’t have cars. They have flying boats. What the fuck is up with that?- pushed up against one wall. Tony refuses to ask for help in figuring out the mechanisms involved in its operation, but he thinks he’s close, and once he understands it, he can improve it. The monkeys skitter around. Blinky has its tail wrapped around a wrench, which clangs against the table legs every now and then, but hey, at least it’s no longer breaking things.

Loki still looks painfully uncertain, but she kisses Tony before she leaves the workshop. She’s a man again by the time she passes through the door, unwilling to let everyone know the way she let Tony know, but that’s fine. It’s her choice, and if she feels safest keeping herself behind closed doors, it’s not Tony’s place to say otherwise.

Chapter End Notes

Clarification: I don't think my fellow trans people are freaks. I just know from personal experience that if you don't know what to call what/who you are, you can definitely feel like a freak.

Comments fill my heart to bursting, and Kudos are lovely as well!

Okay, guys. Prepare yourself. Someone nasty is on his way.
Loki isn’t always a woman. Sometimes he’s a man. In public it doesn’t really matter, because Loki wants Tony to keep treating him like a man when others can see. In private, though, Loki will let Tony know whether to use feminine or masculine terms, because Tony isn’t exactly a mind-reader. ‘Princess’ is still fine to use either way, which Tony is glad of. That’s his favorite nickname for Loki.

On one of his few days dedicated entirely to his workshop, Loki catches him as he slips out of bed. The trickster draws him back in, nuzzling her forehead against his back.

“Come with me, today,” she murmurs. Tony strokes his fingers over her hand.

“Where? I was, uh, kind of going to get started on Mark III B, but- yeah. Where?”

“Thor’s birthday gift is finally ready to be collected. I thought you might like to attend me while I do so.”

“Oh, attend you, huh? I thought I ‘attended’ you just fine.”

Loki nips at his shoulder in admonishment, and Tony can’t help but grin.

“Are you going with me or not?”

“Yeah, I’ll come. What’s his present?”

“Flying goats.”

Tony twists around, trying to see if Loki’s pulling his leg. Uh, flying goats? Loki, however, looks at him with that little half-smile on her lips, and Tony knows she’s telling the truth. He scrubs a hand across his face.

“Well I’m not gonna risk missing that, now am I? You’ve gotta let me up, though. I need clothes if I’m going out.”

“If you insist,” she sniffs, but she lets Tony up. He stretches, rubbing the heel of his palm around the reactor casing. Loki watches him go, a thoughtful look on her face. When Tony turns to rummage through his drawers for clothes, he hears her slide off the bed behind him. Cool hands slide over his chest a moment later, a possessive hand coming to rest over the reactor. Tony freezes, heart thump-thump-thumping. Loki rests her chin on his shoulder, fingers tracing the scar tissue surrounding the casing. Tony swallows thickly, fighting the panic. This is fine. This is safe. Loki trusts him, so he can trust Loki. Loki won’t hurt him. He lets out a shuddering breath, fingers flexing against the edge of the drawer.

“You know, I have heard of an alloy, crafted especially by the dwarves,” she informs him, quietly. Tony focuses on her voice. Loki won’t hurt him. He wants to let her have this, wants to let her touch him, touch the battery powering his heart. It’s just so damn hard to let it happen.

“Yeah?” he croaks.
“Mhmm. They call it living metal. It’s a closely-guarded secret, but I hear they use it for prosthetics, and things like the star in your chest. It’s light, and won’t corrode, and I hear it even adapts to your body’s movement. Bends and flexes with you, rather than remaining an unforgiving pressure.” She presses a kiss to his neck. “Something to think about. Perhaps ask your dragon.”

Loki still sounds bitter about Elder, and that forces Tony to crack a smile. No matter how Tony soothes, Loki still feels insulted by Elder demanding she cease teaching Tony.

“I will. Now let me get dressed already! I’ll meet you in your- uh- your room, okay?”

With one last kiss, Loki releases him.

“Very well. Come by in one hour. We will have breakfast before we depart.”

Tony turns to wave her off, and she offers him another smile before vanishing in a crackle of green.

Tony rolls his eyes. Always a showoff, she is.

When he sees Loki again, he’s presentable. His black hair isn’t a bird’s nest of tangled curls, and hey, he’s actually got clothes on. They have breakfast together, and rather than make use of Heimdall and the bifrost, Loki teleports him directly to the, uh- well. It’s apparently a goat farm.

It’s Tony’s first experience with interplanetary teleportation, though, and it’s- well. It’s different than Loki zapping him from place to place because they’re both too impatient to just walk there. This is exhilarating. It’s like- like- like feeling infinity. Like being pulled through a sea of countless threads, each of them leading somewhere unique. He can’t exactly grab onto those threads, and probably shouldn’t even try, if he wants to avoid ending up lost in the vast reaches of space.

He wishes he could follow them, though. They feel right.

Loki deposits them in a grassy field. A purple grassy field. Not what Tony expected. Loki grins at his obvious bewilderment and gives Tony’s shoulder a playful shove.

“Come on, pick up your jaw. We have goats to collect.”

They trudge through the waist-high purple grass towards a low, wide building, with fenced pastures extending behind it. Tony can hear little ‘mehhh’s as they approach. A burly person answers the door and cracks a smile at the sight of Loki.


Tony doesn’t know what two of those three things are, and that makes him hesitant about the third as well, but Loki declines for the both of them. Right to business, he is. They’re led back to the pasture, where a smaller area has been sectioned off from the rest of the field. A pair of truly impressive goats, both mottled brown and white, graze.

“What the fuck are those,” Tony whispers. Loki, the bitch, laughs at him, but in Tony’s defense, he’s never seen a goat the size of an overgrown great dane. One of them looks up at him, chewing lazily, and yeah, those are demon eyes.

“Those are goats.”

“Smartass.”

Shoran, the goat breeder, shows Loki how to harness the two goats, and how to affix them to an honest-to-god chariot. The goats have apparently been trained, much like a horse might be, and
Loki is given a list of commands and shown the difference between guiding them, and guiding a horse. Loki thanks Shoran and passes off a bag of coins, which Shoran weighs and deems appropriate. Loki spirits away the chariot and takes one of the goats’ leads. He holds the other one out to Tony, but Tony stares at the braided leather like it’s going to bite him. He glances back and forth between the goat and Loki.

“Uh, no thanks.”

“Take the lead.”

“No!”

Tony holds both his hands up over his head. Loki rolls his eyes so far back Tony thinks they might get stuck in the back of his head.

“Why are you so frightened of things with hooves?” the prince demands, perplexed.

“I’m not scared, babe. They’ve just got demon eyes.”

Loki looks down into one of the mammoth goat’s eyes, then levels Tony with an unimpressed glare.

“It’s, uh, almost as tall as I am?” he tries again, but Loki forces his hands shut around the lead, and Tony is left at the tender mercies of what seems to be a goat from hell. “Fuck. Fucking fuck you, Loki.”

His heart thuds painfully behind the reactor. Okay. Maybe he has the tiniest bit of fear towards hoofed mammals. Specifically domesticated hoofed mammals. The nilfbald thing was alright. Then again, Tony hadn’t been forced to interact with it up-close. Hmm.

The goat is fairly easy to lead. All Tony has to do is start walking and the unsettling beast trots alongside him. Loki takes them back out into the open, unfenced purple fields and calls upon Heimdall. If Tony hadn’t been clinging to a red-eyed goat, he probably would have enjoyed the experience of being on the bifrost again a hell of a lot more than he does. And Loki doesn’t even let him turn over the goat once they’re back in Asgard. No, he makes Tony guide one of the goats through the city, to a packed-dirt practice arena of some sort. Only then does Loki stake the leads to the ground and bring the chariot back into existence.

“Go fetch Dave,” Tony is told.

“Why? Are we planning on having any more runaway panic-sessions?”

Loki peers at him strangely.

“What?”

“That seemed to be her function last time you told me ‘go fetch Dave’.”

“No. No, then I simply thought- she would enjoy witnessing Thor’s masquerade. I believe she might enjoy this as well.”

“Alright then. I’ll, uh. I’ll go get Dave.”

Dave is easy enough to find. She’s not in her garden, but the best place to look for her otherwise is Tony’s workshop. He finds her rummaging through his tools while Clyde shyly reaches out to
touch her feathers. Tony waves the monkey away. The last thing Clyde needs to do is pluck Dave out of curiosity.

“Hey, what the fuck do you think you’re doing, huh?” he chides without heat, prompting Dave to look up at him and grumble. He holds out his arm, and Dave clambers up. “Loki thinks you want to see some nasty goats. Do you want to see nasty goats?”

Dave nips his ear, par for the course.

When Tony returns to the practice arena, Thor is there, inspecting the goats with a huge grin on his face.

“Oh, Tony!” Loki greets. “Welcome back. I was simply telling Thor that this is our birthday gift to him.”

It never really occurred to Tony to find out when Thor’s birthday is. Huh.

“Oh yes, they certainly do,” Loki announces smuggly. “Here, allow me to show you how to harness them.”

Tony makes a rapid escape while Loki is distracted. He spots Thor’s friends hanging out in these sturdy spectator’s bleachers, and he makes his way over. Tony doesn’t exactly sit with them, but he does sit in the same general vicinity. This does not, however, prevent him from hearing them gossip.

“What say you to a wager, Volstagg?” Fandral demands, leaning over Hogun.

“What sort of wager?”

“I would wager four-weight of gold that Loki is setting Thor up for another prank.”

“I won’t take that bet.”

“You, Hogun?”

“No.”

Tony kicks back and crosses his arms, watching as Thor gets the hang of it. Apparently he knows how to ride a chariot pulled by horses, but goats are different enough to provide some difficulty. It takes maybe an hour before anything really interesting happens. In that time, Dave flaps down to settle in Tony’s lap, and chirrs happily as Tony runs his fingers through her feathers. She keeps her beady black eyes on the scene before them, although she does look away to nip Tony’s wrist if he gets distracted and stops with his stroking.

Somewhere along the way, while Tony was distracted by the crow, the goats managed to pull themselves a good yard off the ground, with the chariot levitating to follow. Thor whoops, excited, and Loki leaps up into the chariot with him, guiding his brother’s hands as he handles the reins. The chariot wobbles a little, but Thor manages to pull it under control. Tony can see the exact moment when Thor decides to test out speed, because Loki immediately sighs and does his best to prevent Thor from doing so. This doesn’t, however, stop the chariot from tipping over sideways as
Thor rushes around a tight curve. Loki and Thor spill out, skidding over the ground before coming to a stop, and Tony’s on his feet in an instant, clambering down the bleachers. He hears raucous laughter erupting behind him, and much to his relief, he sees Loki roll over and sit up, pushing his curly hair out of his face.

“Well that could have gone better,” Tony observes drily as he approaches, holding out a hand to help Loki up even as Thor gets to his feet. Both brothers are covered in dust.

“It was but Thor’s first attempt,” Loki disagrees. “And it was a marvelous attempt at that.”

Thor beams at his brother’s praise.

“Aye, it was, was it not?” He claps a hand on Loki’s shoulder. “Thank you, brother! These beasts are indeed a fantastic gift! I will practice each day, I swear to you, and when I leap into battle I shall be on the backs of Tanngrisnir and Tanngnjóstr.”

It’s fun. It’s great. Thor offers to let Tony attempt to steer the goats since he’s down there, but uh, no. No way. Tony begs of, looking to Loki for aid, though none comes. Sadistic bitch. Still, he avoids having to interact with the Tann twins (thank god), and hey, Tony even gets some time in the workshop at the end of the day. Dave stick to him like glue until he gives her a ribbon, and then she amuses herself leading the monkeys on a merry chase, the four synthetic beings falling over themselves to catch the ribbon.

Thor’s birthday, it turns out, is twelve days later. Two days before that, however, Loki’s uncle comes to stay.

His name is Baldur, and he’s like an older, more graceful version of Thor with yellow hair. Tony learns he’s Odin’s brother. Why hasn’t he heard of this guy until now? Well apparently—and Tony didn’t know this—Asgard has colonies. There’s the main city of Asgard, the city of gold. And then, waaaaay off into the distance, just beneath the horizon of what’s left of the former-planet, there’s been an effort to reclaim the outer reaches. Sigyn was apparently part of that. Loki says that’s one of the reasons she chose to go live in the distant mountains.

Anyways, Baldur is in charge of managing these colonies, and he seems to do quite well. It’s just, he can’t possibly miss his nephew’s birthday, can he?

They meet when Tony’s showing off his new and improved vein-powered gauntlets to Loki, outside in the same practice arena Thor tested out his goats in. Loki amused himself lifting the targets and spinning them around, while Tony laughs and blasts them out of the sky, one by one. They all fall to the ground in a heap, though, when a booming, cheerful call of “Loki!” echoes around the arena.

Tony doesn’t remember ever seeing the color drain from Loki’s face so quickly, not even when confronted by an irritated dragon. He follows Loki’s wide-eyed gaze to see the Thor look-alike striding towards them, yellow hair shining gold in the sun. Tony gravitates towards Loki, touching him lightly on the back before letting his hand drop into a loose fist.

“Who’s this?” he murmurs. Loki can’t seem to tear his eyes away from the yellow-haired man.

“My uncle,” Loki whispers, obviously struggling to stay neutral. He wets his lips. “Baldur.”

Baldur brushes past Tony to look his muscular arms around Loki, crushing him in a hug. Loki remains stiff, like a deer in headlights.

“How’s my favorite nephew doing, hmm?” Baldur sets Loki down, although his hand lingers
on Loki’s shoulder. Loki forces a brittle smile.

“I am doing well, Uncle. I wasn’t- aware you were due to return.”

“I asked your father to keep it a secret, actually. I thought it would be a nice surprise.” Baldur grins, bouncing up on the balls of his feet. “It’s been years since I was here for either of your birthdays. This will be a nice change, eh?”

“Oh yes. Wonderful. Um.” Loki sidesteps a little closer to Tony, their elbows touching.

Tony has this little pit of gnawing worry growing in his gut, warning bells ringing in his head. He decides to cut in.

“Hi there, uh, Baldur was it?” Tony doesn’t offer his hand, just plasters on a sharp smile. “I’m Tony Stark. One of Loki’s friends.”

There’s a sort of possessive protectiveness flaring to life, and he bristles under the appraising, then dismissive, glance thrown his way.

“One of Loki’s friends? I wasn’t aware he had them,” Baldur laughs, placing a hand on the wide belt cinching his tunic.

As far as first impressions go, it isn’t a good one. Loki remains tight-lipped about his uncle, won’t speak a word. So he’s not proud of it, but he goes behind Loki’s back. He goes to Frigga. Because come on. Loki’s avoiding him now. They’ve been ‘secretly’ sharing a bed for over eight months. Thick as thieves. Bffs. And now- nothing. Absolutely nothing. Loki’s back to avoiding Tony. Won’t open the door when Tony comes by and knocks at night. Slips away or vanishes in a flash of green when he spots Tony approaching. Tony’s worried.

Except Frigga isn’t available. She and Baldur don’t get along, so Odin apparently sent her away, to see to the colonies he left unattended to come to Thor’s birthday feast. From the gossip he hears, Frigga didn’t go quietly either, but Baldur was the one who escorted her to the bifrost for travel, and for whatever reason, that makes all the difference.

Tony drops by Unnur’s forge. She’s doing well for herself. In addition to Rolf and Astrid, she has two other helpers, including a little brown-eyed girl who seems to be an official apprentice. Technically Unnur doesn’t need Tony’s help anymore, but he likes her company.

They sit down to lunch together, a vase full of magnificent flowers on the table between them. Unnur pushes the vase slightly to her left, to get it out of the way. Tony assumes they’re from her girlfriend’s garden, though she goes red in the face when Tony refers to Idunn as such.

“What do you know about some guy named Baldur?” he starts, right off the bat.

Unnur pauses where she’s unwrapping a sandwich.

“I keep forgetting you’re not from here. He’s is the king’s younger brother. Why? Can’t you ask your prince? I figure he might be better to ask than me.”

“That’s the issue. I think something’s wrong. Loki’s been avoiding me ever since Baldur showed up in the palace. I don’t think they get along. Or, at least, I don’t think Loki likes him.”

“What? That’s crazy. Everyone likes Baldur. He’s like-” Unnur taps a finger on the crust of her bread. “He’s like Asgard’s sun. Legend has it, when he was born his mom was so smitten she made everything in the known realms- not just the nine- promise that neither they nor their descendents
would ever hurt him.” She takes a bite of the sandwich, talking through the mouthful. “Makes him fuckin’ awesome in battle. How do you win a fight against a guy who can’t be hurt?”

Tony rests his elbows on the table, the wheels of his mind turning and turning.

“That’s a lot of power for one man,” he allows. “Invincibility. Does he- d’you think he uses it alright? I mean, that he doesn’t, you know, abuse it?”

Unnur fixes him with a skeptical eye, swallowing her food.

“What, you think he’s using the promise to intimidate your Loki? Odin wouldn’t allow it. I mean, yeah, Baldur’s his baby brother, but Loki’s his son. I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

And yet, something definitely isn’t right.

Chapter End Notes

I bet y'all thought I wasn't actually going to bring in the goats.

Anyways, Baldur's here. Historically, that does not end well.
Chapter Notes

So a warning here for sexual assault and implied/referenced repeated rape. I really, really hope I didn't treat it too flippantly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Tony *finally* manages to pin Loki, the mage has purple-grey bags dusting the skin under his eyes, and the skin of his palm is worn through and scabbed. He sits on a secluded bench in one of the palace’s many gardens- this one arranged like some kind of maze. Really, the only reason Tony even *finds* Loki is Dave and her cohorts. She catches him on his way to the library, plucking at his hair and croaking and cawing at him until he gives in and follows. Two other crows join them when Tony walks outside, and, with the aid of the three birds, he finds the maze, navigates it, and finds Loki staring into the waters of a fountain, his eyes glassy and dim.

“Hey there, Lo,” Tony greets cautiously. Loki flinches away ever so slightly, and Tony worries at the inside of his cheek. His eyes drop to the smears of rusty red on Loki’s palm as his thumb rubs and grinds into the damaged skin. Tony settles onto the bench beside Loki. “Hey, stop that. That’s not- that’s not great.”

Tony reaches out to take Loki’s hand, to soothe the compulsive rubbing, but Loki jerks his hands away from Tony, pressing them to his chest.

“Do not touch me,” the prince hisses. He remains tense and wary, and Tony swallows. “How dare you demand I respect your boundaries without respecting mine in turn.”

“Okay, no touching. I won’t touch you. No problem.” Fuck, what does he do? “Um, is everything alright? I mean, I’m here for you, if it isn’t. You know you can trust me, right?”

Loki glances off the the side, angling his body away from Tony, although he doesn’t leave the bench.

“Everything is fine,” he growls. “You need not show these- these *concerns*. There is no reward for pitying me.”

“Look, princess-” Tony ventures, quietly, but Loki leaps to his feet, rounding on Tony with seething fury in his face.

“You will *not* call me that,” Loki spits. Tony freezes, eyes wide. “You may play at being my *friend*, but *do not call me that*.”

“Okay, um-”

Loki vanishes, leaving Tony still searching for his words. He replays the conversation in his head, trying to figure out what exactly he said that was so wrong. Princess? He thought Loki *liked* being called princess.

“Well what do you think?” he demands as Dave and her two buddies settle down on the back of the bench.
They’re just birds, though. Freakishly-smart birds, but birds nonetheless.

Dave fluffs up her feathers and cocks her head.

“Alright, tiny thing. You’re on a mission now.” He holds out a hand for Dave to hop up on, and she does so. He feels her claws dig into his hand. “You keep an eye on Loki, got it? If there’s something wrong, you come and get me. You take me to him.”

Dave’s beak clicks, and there’s something almost- approving about her.

“How do you look smug with a beak?” he mutters. Dave leaves another red nip mark on his wrist before taking off, her two cohorts in tow.

If Loki notices he’s being tailed by crows, he doesn’t make any mention of it, nor does he react. Tony can’t exactly interrogate the birds, know what they see, but he waits, and he stays close to the palace. Something is wrong, and he needs to know what. He visits Elder for a grand total of ten minutes, letting him know about the necessary lull in lessons. He sends a message to Unnur, telling her he’ll be unavailable as well.

And then he waits. Preparations are made for Thor’s birthday celebration. A full day of feasting, he’s told. And then another day of hunting, with yet more feasting for the nobles staying behind. The third day will be one of sports and exhibitions. Fun fun fun.

And fucking Baldur. Tony can see what Unnur meant about him being Asgard’s sun. He practically shines, filling the room with charismatic light. People hang on his every word, and he actually sees Odin smile.

But Loki withers. And hides. And Tony watches. And waits.

The feast is raucous and loud. Dave hops around in the rafters of the banquet hall, and Tony keeps an eye on her as he eats. It’s hard, though, not getting distracted by the Asgardians. They seem like bottomless pits. To be perfectly frank, there’s no way their bodies should be able to contain the sheer mass of food they’re taking in.

Tony sits amongst the ‘honored guests’, the people at the high table. Several seats to his right, the royal family is seated. Tony glances down towards Loki every now and again, but the prince won’t look at him. Instead, he picks at his food, eating tiny little bits while Thor regales his companions with stories of grandeur.

Rather than having Frigga at his right-hand side, Odin had Mercel. On Mercel’s right is Baldur, and the pair seem to get along like a house on fire. While Odin toasts to Thor’s continued health, Mercel lays a hand on Baldur’s arm.

“You simply must stay,” he hears her say beneath the din. “There are matters I would treasure your thoughts upon.”

Tony rolls his eyes, drinking deep from his water.

The feast goes strong throughout the entire day, but towards the late afternoon, Loki excuses himself from the table. Tony tries to stand up and follow him, but Thor notices him and reaches across his friends, flapping a hand to get Tony attention.

“My friend! Tell us the tale of how you and my brother found my wondrous goats!”

He freezes, worrying the inside of his cheek. His eyes linger on Loki’s retreating back, but Dave
swoops down to follow, blending into the shadows. He doesn’t need to smother Loki. Dave will come get him if he’s needed.

So he sits back down and tells the rather bland story of beaming down to a purple field and buying the goats. He isn’t as much of a dramatic storyteller- bard- whatever type person, but, uh, at least Thor and his pals humor him?

Tony glances back over his shoulder again, the sour-bitter feeling of worry gnawing at his gut again. He really does excuse himself this time, sliding back away from the table and making his escape. A block of ice sits in his gut. Baldur’s gone too.

The halls echo with the sounds of the feast behind him, but as Tony puts some distance between himself and the banquet hall, they quiet down a little. When he passes by a window, Dave comes careening in and collides with his shoulder, cawing maddly and squawking up a storm. Yeah, okay. Time to run.

Dave flies through the halls in front of him while Tony sprints behind. Tony recognizes the route, knowing it to be on the way to Frigga’s weaving room. They don’t make it all the way there, though. Dave takes a sharp turn down a smaller, side hall and flares her wings, slowing down and landing on the floor. She hops forwards a few paces, then looks back at Tony. The inventor pauses too, heart pounding from the mad dash. He presses a hand over the reactor to feel the thud, and as Dave walks slowly, quietly down the curved hall, he follows suite.

A murmuring voice reaches Tony from down the hall, and he pauses, summoning his reluctant magic to cast a muffling spell, dulling the sounds of his footsteps.

“You like this, don’t you,” the voice growls over a shallow gasp. Baldur. Tony knows it’s Baldur, even before he sees the shining yellow hair, one heavy hand pinning Loki in place as the other wanders. “Don’t play coy with me, princess. We both know you’re gagging for it.”

Okay, that’s enough. Tony doesn’t exactly need or want to hear more. He gives Dave a nudge with his shoe, and she sets off cawing down the hall.

“Hey, Dave!” Tony shouts, feigning exasperation as he releases the muffling spell. He thuds down the hall after her. “Get back here!”

Tony chases after the crow, passing where Baldur has straightened, neatly stepping away from Loki, who sags against the wall.

Dave obligingly takes a sharp turn and ends up back on his arm, and Tony rubs the feathered skin around her ear holes.

“Delinquent,” he gripes, making his way back down the hall. When he ‘catches sight’ of Loki and Baldur, he feigns surprise. “Oh! Hi, Lo, and, um, Baldur. Is it- I don’t know. Are you a prince?”

“Yes, prince,” Baldur replies jovially, smoothing out his ornate tunic. “But there’s no need for formalities. A friend of Loki’s is a friend of mine.”

“Uh, awesome. Oh, wow, Loki, you look a bit peaky.”

Tony does his best to channel his inner nursemaid, fussing over Loki, who won’t look him in the eye.

“He probably ate something strange at the feast. When he was a child, everything seemed to disagree with his stomach,” Baldur laughs, clapping Loki on the shoulder. “I was just helping him
to the infirmary.”

Loki remains absolutely silent, picking at the scabs on his palm.

“That’s, uh, really nice of you, Baldur. But how about I take him? Thor’s been asking for you, and we don’t want to upset the birthday boy, do we?”

Baldur’s eyes linger on Loki, but he acquiesces. He takes his leave, apparently unwilling to forgo a willing audience, but before he does, he pauses, holding up a finger.

“Ah, Tony, was it? Why a crow, might I ask? There are far more noble birds.”

Dave churrs unhappily in her chest.

“She picked me, and we’ve been a team ever since.”

“I see. Well,” he booms, clapping his hands together. “Let me know when you tire of it. I’d be happy to take you out searching for a proper falcon, or even an eagle!”

Tony waits until he can’t hear Baldur’s footsteps anymore. Loki still won’t look at him, but Tony is relieved to see that while his clothes are rumpled, they aren’t- well. It looks like Baldur didn’t get as far as he could have.

This time, a horrible little voice whispers.

“Hey, Lo? Babe?” ‘Princess’ is off the table, possibly for good. “Don’t go doing your, uh, your magic disappearing act, okay?” Dave tries to hop from Tony’s arm and onto Loki, but he catches her and holds her between his hands, her wings folded against her body and legs dangling down. “Are you alright?”

Stupid question. Stupid, stupid question.

Loki takes a shuddering breath, his head bowed in shame, and his knees buckle. He lands on the ground with a thump and covers his face with his hands. Tony wets his lips and gets down to his knees, setting Dave back on his shoulder.

“You should not have seen,” Loki whispers miserably. “You should not have- this is my shame to bear. Mine alone. I did not want-” He hiccups, the trembling of his shoulders worsening to shakes.

Okay. Think. Um- Tony’s almost been in the same situation. Once. And it was an isolated incident that Rhodey saved him from. All he wanted was a scalding hot shower and steel wool to scrub off his skin with, but, uh, the steel wool never came into the picture. He hadn’t wanted to be touched, for a while. The Incident, which was what he compartmentalized it as, was one of the now-multitudinous reasons he had started to hate being handed things. If he was handed a drink by someone else, how could he be sure it wasn’t laced with something unpleasant?

“Alright, but I did see. And I think- um. I think maybe that’s a good thing. ‘Cause now I know I’m not going to leave you alone again, until- Until you’re safe. Okay? You’re safe with me.”

Loki shakes his head, furiously scraping his hand across his cheek to wipe away the wetness there. He shivers in earnest now, like someone who’s walked outside into a snowbank without any sort of coat. Tony thinks maybe this isn’t the greatest thing.

“Can you zap us to- to your room? Hmm? We’ll lock the door, keep everyone else out. I mean, I’ll leave too, if you want to be alone, but I’d like to stay. To, you know. Hang out with you. I miss
Great. That’s exactly what he needs to do to Loki. Guilt him into accepting Tony’s attention. He tastes ash in his mouth at the thought.

“I can-cannot,” Loki hiccups, blinking rapidly to clear his eyes. “I cannot. I- my magic it- it flies from my t-touch, like- like- l-like-”

“Shh. That’s okay. That’s fine. We’ll walk, alright?”

Whether the issue with Loki’s magic stems from his distress or something Baldur actually did to him, Tony doesn’t know. Fuck.

Loki nods, and his limbs are uncoordinated and jerky when he unfolds to his feet again. The prince sways and braces against the wall. Tony moves to help him, but Loki snaps and snarls, like a cornered animal, “Do not touch me!”

Immediately, he curls inward again, as though expecting some sort of retribution for his outburst. It doesn’t come. Of course it doesn’t. Tony simply takes a step back, holding up a hand for Dave to climb onto.

“You go ahead. Let us know if we’re going to run into anyone.”

Loki draws his mask of indifference around him like armor, his face shutting down to be cool and cold and calculated, despite the red rimming his eyes. He walks with purpose, with cracked and fragile grace, once he regains his footing. Tony pads after him, keeping an eye out. With Dave’s help, they do manage to reach Loki’s room. The lock clicks shut behind them, and Tony presses his palm over the door’s handle. A small burst of blue flares beneath his hand before dying down again. No unwanted visitors. He turns around to find dispassionate green eyes locked onto him as Loki stares him down like a cat considering a lame mouse. Tony swallows.

“If you want me to leave,” he begins, carefully. “I will. But, uh, I’d rather be here. With you. Helping you.”

“I do not need your help,” the prince sneers, all vulnerability hidden and locked away again. Tony knows that sort of bravado, the sort that gets you through the day, until you can find a safe place to crack and shatter again.

“I know. I just- It’ll make me feel better, okay? No touching, I swear.”

Loki’s pale throat works as he swallows, his eyes sliding off of Tony again.

“You will wait here, then, until I see fit to entertain you.”

Tony doesn’t exactly want to be ‘entertained’ like a guest, but he’ll take what he can get. Loki sweeps into his bathroom, but Tony doesn’t miss the way the prince’s hand shakes as he braces against the doorway.

The door slams closed, but no lock clicks. Tony shares a long look with Dave, who has herself perched on the headboard of Loki’s bed.

The room is an absolute mess. And it isn’t the kind of mess you get when you don’t clean up after yourself. It looks like a bomb went off, or a tornado took shape. The furniture is splintered in some places, chipped and scratched in others. All of Loki’s beautiful books are in a haphazard heap, loose, torn-out pages rustling when Tony bents down to pick one up. The drapes are closed tightly,
but when Tony opens them to let in the light, his lips thin. The room looks like a battlefield, like a disaster area. It looks like rage.

Tony sets to work tidying up, where he can. He gingerly picks up the books and organizes the torn pages into neat stacks. He cleans up the splinters of wood and uses a rag and the pitcher of water he finds to wipe ashy scorch marks off the walls. Hell, he even makes the bed. Fat lot of good that does. As an afterthought, he goes through Loki’s clothes to find something loose and comfortable, which he lays out on the bed. Who knows. Maybe Loki’s going to want to put on his armor, to give himself some semblance of protection, but at the moment, all Tony can allow himself to think about is his companion’s comfort.

Nearly an hour passes, and Tony finds himself growing worried. He tells himself to relax, to calm down. Loki obviously needs his privacy.

But what if he’s hurt himself?

The door is unlocked when Tony tries it another half-hour later, and as it swings silently open he’s greeted by the patter of water falling like rain from the top of the open shower. Loki stands there, heat-pinked and bruised and scabbed in the worst possible ways, scrubbing methodically at his arm with a sponge. A coarse one, judging by the raw look of his skin.

“Loki, I’m in here now,” he calls softly, not wanting to surprise his friend. Loki doesn’t respond. Tony blocks Dave from following into the bathroom behind him, and shuts the door instead. He grabs a huge, fluffy towel from its rack and drapes it over his arm. “I’m going to come closer now, alright?”

“You need not treat me like a spooked animal,” Loki rasps, switching the sponge from one hand to another so he can work on rubbing his other arm raw.

There are hard bruises on his hips, sharp bites on his back that Tony knows don’t belong to him. He closes his eyes, taking a moment to compose himself.

“You’re right; I’m sorry,” he replies when he opens his eyes again. “But I think it’s time for you to get out of the shower now.” He opens up the towel and holds it out. Loki doesn’t spare him a glance, simply starts work on his scabbed palms. Tony frowns and drapes the towel across his shoulder. “Lokes, you’re going to hurt yourself.”

“Better it be by my own hand,” is the whispered response that absolutely breaks his fucking heart.

Tony rolls his sleeves up and reaches into the shower, careful not to brush against Loki as he thumbs the pad to switch off the water. He gingerly takes hold of the sponge next, prompting a flinch from Loki as the object is removed from his hands. He stares blankly at the wall, as Tony wraps the towel around him. Newly-bloodied hands dig into the soft material, clutching it close.

“I’m going to make some tea. I’d like it if you joined me, Lo.”

There’s definitely a hidden stash of tea leaves. Tony found them while cleaning, and he managed to find the shattered pieces of porcelain cups where they had fallen after being dashed against the wall. A few minutes of fierce concentration and magic blue sparkles render them whole cups again, and while they aren’t tea cups, they’ll do.

God, he fucking hates tea. But Loki likes it, and Loki definitely needs some tea.

He takes the remainder of the pitcher of water and uses the trick Loki taught him a while back, of boiling water with his breath. For a moment, he allows himself to feel like a dragon blowing fire,
but surely a dragon would have protected what he considers his, rather than letting things get this far.

The tea leaves go into the pitcher without anything holding them, which Tony regrets as soon as he realizes this means they’re going to be picking leaves out of their teeth when they drink, but oh well. What is, is.

Loki emerges just long enough to take the clothes laid out for him, before he returns to the bathroom. When he comes out once more, Tony has two cups of tea poured and waiting on what survives of Loki’s writing battered table. The prince takes a cup in mechanical, trembling hands and drinks deeply. Tony mimics him, though he takes little sips, doing his best not to grimace.

They don’t speak, not for a long while. Not until the sun sets in a blaze of pink and orange, not until Asgard’s crumbling moon drifts up over them and sinks slowly to the other side. Loki sits with Tony on the balcony, a blanket around his shoulder while Dave purrs in his lap. His face is tilted up, into the moonlight.

“I suppose you’ll want an explanation,” Loki murmurs, picking at the threads of the blanket.

“Not if you don’t want to give it,” Tony counters. “I’m just happy to sit out here with you.”

“Is that right.”

Loki doesn’t sound convinced, but Tony doesn’t press.

The sky is beginning to turn pale blue again when Loki gathers Dave up, the bird adjusting herself to be held against his chest.

“I want to—” Loki breaks off, brow furrowing. “I don’t know the right- words.”

“That’s fine. That’s kind of- I mean, that’s kind of the nature of friendship, right? You don’t need words all the time. Sometimes things can go unspoken and be accepted nonetheless.”

“But they are eating me from the inside,” the prince whispers. “I need them out. I need—” He breaks off again, and steeling himself. “He has- this- four hundred years, Tony. Four hundred, ever since I- was old enough. He is not often- here. Not often in Asgard. But when he does come—” Loki grits his teeth, biting back a wounded sound. “Four hundred years. I fought, at first. Because- I fought. But how do you fight a man who cannot be harmed? I fought, and failed, and gave up. I should not have given up. I lost the right to hate him the moment I gave up.”

“No. No, baby, that’s not true. He’s definitely a- uh- a hateable person. I mean, trust me. Given the chance I’d—”

“Be careful, Tony,” Loki warns, voice hollow. “He is a prince of Asgard. To plot harm against him is treason of the highest sort.”

Tony scrubs a tired hand across his eyes. Goddamn monarchy. He lets his hand drop, his head thumping back against the wall.

“Did you ever tell anyone?”

“Mother suspects, I believe, but she is sent away whenever he visits every few decades. Otherwise- who would believe me? No one. Not against the Sun of Asgard. Besides—” He smiles sharply. “I ceased fighting him. Who is to say I did not want his touch?”
“I believe you. Fuck, Lo, I believe you. What he did- Goddamn it, I knew there was something wrong with him. You deserve so much better.”

“Enough with- your platitudes,” Loki sighs, sounding utterly exhausted. Tony’s mouth clicks shut, and Loki digs his fingers into his curly black hair. “Nothing can be done.”

Defeat should never, ever be in Loki’s tone, but there it is.

“There’s always something, Lo. There’s no such thing as a hopeless situation. There’s always something. And you’ve got me, now. I’ll help.”

“Believe me, Tony. There is nothing.”

But there is something. Tony plasters himself to Loki’s side like super-glue. Strength in numbers, and all that. Loki goes somewhere, Tony goes somewhere. Fuck, Tony even mounts a goddamn horse so he can go riding with the hunting party. If Baldur notices Tony’s interference, he doesn’t show it. Instead he remains his usual boisterous, shining self.

When Baldur shoots some sort of flying mammal in the woods they’re hunting in, he invited Loki along to go fetch the injured prey.

“Hey, I’ll come too!” Tony announces, clumsily steering his hellbeast towards where Odin is waving Loki off to appease his uncle. “I’ve never actually seen a whorlnip alive.”

“Ah. Of course, Tony. By all means.”

The whorlnip has itself trapped in the top of a tree, too injured to take flight again, but too hale to drop down. Baldur eyes the half-dead oak tree, covered in bunches of green hanging downwards. His lips purse, and he glances at Loki and Tony.

“Alright Tony. You’ve never seen one, you say? Why don’t you climb up and get it.”

“Shouldn’t you catch it, since you shot it?”

Loki looks between Baldur and the tree, brow furrowed in confusion.

“I insist. You really would find it interesting-”

“Oh by the nine,” Loki mutters, dismounting his horse. “I’ll get it.”

Tony watches Loki stiffly climb the tree, collecting the animal at the top. There’s a sharp squeal before Loki’s knife silences the injured creature, and the he descends once more. When he does reach the ground, he has a bunch of that green stuff clenched in his hands. Baldur eyes it warily.

“Look at this,” Loki exclaims. “Actual mistletoe. I’m surprised to find it out here.”

“Why?” Tony inquires, approaching. He takes a sprig between his fingers. “It’s fucking everywhere, where I’m from.” He simply was too much of a city chicken to know what to call it.

“Asgard’s gardeners have been working to exterminate it for centuries,” Baldur clarifies. “Because it’s toxic. Loki, put that down. We must rejoin the rest of the party.”

“I thought we could return with it,” Loki disagrees, touching one of the leaves. “Perhaps this Yule we could have actual mistletoe in the palace, rather than holly.”

“I said drop it!” Baldur snaps, lashing out to knock the mistletoe from Loki’s hands. The plant hits
the ground, and a look of startled shock fills Loki’s face, but for once his eyes are clear.

“Of course, uncle.” There’s something deep and dark in his words, but Tony doesn’t look past the surface.

They ride back to the hunting party, Baldur brandishing the whorlnip in the air. He hands it off to the people specifically in charge of securing bagged prey, and off they go again, this time following a pack of dogs chasing down deer.

Tony doesn’t manage to shoot a single thing, which is fine, because he’s too busy holding on for dear life to worry about using the offered energy-bow. There’s another feast waiting for them when they return to the palace, and the freshly-killed spoils of the hunt are carted off to be prepared for tomorrow’s feast. There’s a sort of determined set to Loki’s shoulders this time, and while Tony remains by his side until Loki’s safely in his own room, the prince doesn’t want to chat. He does say goodnight at the door, reaching out to touch Tony’s face. His hand hesitates and drops before contact is made, but it’s the thought that counts.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to, I don’t know, sit with you for a while? We could have tea again.”

“No, Tony.” Green eyes meet his, finally. “I’m fine. I’ll see you tomorrow, bright and early. I will collect you for breakfast.”

Tony is left standing in the hallway as the door locks, rubbing the back of his neck. There’s something fragile about the way Loki says ‘fine’, but he can’t really do anything but trust. Loki says he doesn’t need Tony with him. Tony says he’s going to respect boundaries, now that Loki doesn’t seem to be in immediate danger from himself.

The next day, he and Loki really do eat breakfast together. They eat together, and walk to the fields appointed for the day’s games together. Loki, predictably, enters into the knife-throwing contests, and- more surprisingly- a spear-toss competition, but there are other sports and exhibitions. It’s more like a well-established festival than a sporting event, actually. If Tony weren’t so nervous about sticking to Loki’s side, he would probably enjoy it a hell of a lot more. The smiths’ tents give him ideas. Unnur is, unfortunately, not present today, but that’s more to do with the fact that she isn’t fully established yet, even with her increased patronage.

A light breeze picks up as the day progresses, and it’s refreshing in the face of the heat of open fires and bright sun and many, many bodies. Loki watches the time hawkishly, counting every minute, until, in time, he drags Tony to the archery range. People of all shapes, sizes, colors, and limb-possession practice their shooting on targets. Some of them have weapons similar to compound bows from earth. Others use the energy-bows favored on the previous day’s hunt. Still others possess bows unlike anything Tony really even recognizes. Thor, Baldur, and Odin are gathered together towards the center of the range, where Baldur has a massive bow of his own, nearly as tall as the man himself. From the chatter, there’s apparently going to be some sort of archery competition between the classes of archers soon, and Baldur is participating. When Tony looks to his left, where he last saw Loki- the prince is gone. Just- gone.

Tony maybe panics a little bit.

He pushes through the crowd towards the archery range.

“Loki!” he calls, raising his voice as he bullies his way to the front of the amassed people. “Lo?”

Farther down, speaking with a blindfolded archer, is a woman with her back turned to Tony, but he
recognizes that mess of black curls. He starts making his way towards her, as she pulls out a bundle of bone-white arrows. The archer bows shallowly, taking the arrows with a grin, and much to Tony’s exasperation, his Lady Loki vanishes back into the crowd.

“Fucking hell, Lokes,” Tony growls, turning to scan the crowd. He nearly jumps out of his skin when a hand clamps down on his shoulder, but when he whirls around it’s only Loki. “What happened to the no-touching rule? Anyways, what the hell was that? What did you give that guy?” He points towards the archer, now testing out his bone-white arrows.

“What in the nine are you speaking of?” Loki asks, tilting his head like a bird. He looks Tony straight in the eye, and his poker face is good, but he’s picking at the scabs of his palms again. “I have been searching for you.”

“The arrows, Loki. Why did you give that man arrows?”

A horn blows, and Loki looks up, then takes Tony by the arm.

“Come, we would be remiss to not watch the competition.”

Loki helps him up onto the hovering platform Odin, Thor, and Mercel are already seated upon. The first rounds are performed by the compound-bow users, and yeah, it’s impressive, but Tony keeps looking up at Loki, whose blank face is not comforting.

A man named Rorch takes the prize for that round, and the top five archers are to be taken to another location to compete on moving targets, then the final three will shoot targets from horseback to determine the champion for their bow class.

The same procedure goes for the energy bows. Ludwiro wins that one. What Tony finds odd is that archers, during the practice rounds, walk down to get their arrows willy-nilly. There’s no waiting for an appointed safe time to retrieve your arrows. When Tony asks Loki, the prince smiles- a thing of terrible beauty.

“There is no need for such formality,” he murmurs. “These are Asgard’s best archers. Every arrow will fly true.”

The amassed crowd cheers in their bleachers when it comes time for the longbow competition. The air is beginning to slowly cool, and the wind has picked up. Questions have been raised regarding the wisdom of continuing a competition involving projectiles with the wind whipping around them.

Baldur lifts his bow, however, and announces,” Nay, friends. Hold fast. Wind or no, we are Asgard’s best archers. Our arrows will fly true.”

Loki leans forwards in his seat as the timer starts ticking down- 5 minutes for last-minute warm-ups and practice.

Three things happen, in perfect, decisive order.

Baldur walks down the line to retrieve his arrows from the target.

The archer with the bone-white arrows draws back, taking aim.

Loki snaps his fist shut.

Baldur plucks his arrows from the target, pausing a moment to take his tally, determine what
adjustments he needs to make next time. As he walks back up to take his place- as a fist closes around air- as a bone-white arrow takes flight- a gust of wind tears down the archery field.

There’s a bloom of red, and Baldur falls to his knees, clutching at the arrow in his throat. Someone screams, and Odin vaults off the floating platform, running to his brother.

It’s pandemonium. People mill about, trying to see the prince thrashing in the grass. Odin tries to still his brother, a litany of ‘no, no Baldur, no’s falling from his lips, but all at once, while the wind whips itself into a fury, the yellow-haired Sun of Asgard stills, eyes glassy and unseeing as his last breath bubbles out around the arrow. Tony tears his gaze away to instead see Loki standing at the edge of the platform, a tiny, bitter smile on his lips. His hands are fists.

Chapter End Notes

Has anyone watched Call the Midwife? It draws you in with heart-felt, loving episodes at first before moving on to very poignant and deep and difficult episodes later on. There’s a really difficult, powerful episode in which one of the nuns is (presumably sexually and physically) assaulted. She isn’t penatratively raped, but she is, of course, traumatized nonetheless. It’s a really striking view into the shame and fear someone might feel after an assault like that, and how difficult it can be to speak about it, even to get help.
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

There’s a funeral, because of course there is. Everyone knows Baldur as the Sun of Asgard, the yellow-haired prince, the hero who was so loved that everything in existence swore never to hurt him.

And yet, the bone-white arrow.

The arrows are confiscated, and the archer who used them swears up and down that he doesn’t know what they’re made of, that some woman gave them to him. Does he remember what she looked like? Uh, not so much. He says her form vanishes like smoke from his mind every time he tries to pin her down.

People say that Hel was desperate to have the soul of someone so full of life, that Death herself provided the arrows, that surely it was a dark elf in disguise, that maybe it really was just an accident.

Tony brushes Loki’s hair, helps her straighten it as she looks out the window. Loki is perfectly capable of performing the task herself, but she pushes herself, day by day, to accept more of Tony’s usual tactile affections. Tony tries to make it known that he’s fine if she needs to take things slow, but this always leads to accusations of Tony viewing her as weak or damaged, so he lets Loki have her way.

Frigga is on her way home. Apparently the general populace expects their queen to be in attendance of her brother-in-law’s funeral. The body is being held, suspended in a shimmering, liquid-looking medium that holds its rounded shape. It’s been cleaned and dressed and adorned in full battle regalia, and it’s on display in the throne room so that any who want to can come pay their respects. ‘Any who want to’ turns out to be everyone. There’s a constant stream of people of all classes in and out of the throne room, leaving behind flowers and trinkets and offerings of food.

Loki mostly stays in her room. While Odin and Thor walk around with their hair bound back with an ink-black ribbon, every nonessential adornment laid aside, Loki hides.

It’s understandable, Tony hears people say, when he goes out to fetch snacks or what-have-you. Loki always did have a special bond with his uncle.

It makes Tony want to scream.

Baldur, the Golden Sun of Asgard.

Yeah, more like Baldur the rapist.

The Asgardian version of a flattening iron is a pair of little soft pads that slip on over your thumb and forefinger. When activated, they glow a pale purple. There’s no heat, so Tony doesn’t know how they work, but Tony knows he’s been asked to use them.

“He liked the curls,” is Loki’s distant explanation, and that’s enough for Tony. If Loki wants straight hair, then she can have straight hair. Maybe someday she’ll be comfortable looking however she wants without being reminded of her uncle, but there’s no rush. Of course there isn’t.
Loki still shies away from touch, but days later, as the sun sets, he asks Tony to share his bed again. Just for sleeping, which Tony doesn’t mind. They wake up the next morning with a good yard of distance between them, but the cautiously-warm look Tony sees on Loki’s face when he catches the prince staring at him as he wakes up is a familiar, endearing comfort.

As it turns out, it will be nearly another five months before they share a bed to do more than kiss and sleep, and over a year before Loki’s willing and comfortable to lay out beneath Tony again in any form, but not once will Tony feel cheated or resentful. Those clever fingers have found their way beneath his arc reactor to the giving flesh beneath, and there’s no backing out, in his mind.

Frigga tries to hold Loki close when she returns, but her son ducks away from her open arms. Where were you, his eyes seem to say. I needed you.

The funeral is impressive. There’s a boat, loaded down with gifts and flowers and slaughtered animals, and it’s pushed out onto the still waters before the palace. One by one, people send glowing orbs into the air like little stars, and Odin takes Baldur’s longbow, shoots a flaming arrow into the boat. They watch as tongues of fire overtake the boat. Mercel’s fingers rub soothingly over the back of Odin’s neck, and the king slouches, like a puppet with cut strings. She embraces him and whispers in his ear. Frigga remains steadfastly upright.

There’s a dumb supper, a simple meal held entirely in silence in respect of the dead, and that night, not a single light is lit in the shining city.

Not a single one, except for the blazing lantern in Tony’s room. The lantern brought by Loki.

Her ruler-straight hair is shorter now, only to her shoulders rather than halfway down her back. It still flips out when the turns sharply, pacing the room as the glowing lantern-orb lights the space. Tony sits on the edge of the bed and avoid watching her directly, because she is very, very naked, and it feels almost like a violation to stare at her.

This, however, pisses Loki off, and she grabs his cheeks between her fingers, and he makes a small noise of pain as she shakes his head slightly.

“You will look at me,” she spits. “I will be naked if I wish to be naked, and you will look at me nonetheless. Unless what you see is too damaged, unless I have lost worth in your eyes.”

She lets him go, storming off again to resume her agitated prowl from one end of the room to the other, but she glances at him every now and again. Tony swallows thickly. He’s thinks he might be on thin ice, but he doesn’t know how or why. He definitely doesn’t take his eyes off of Loki again.

“So, uh-” Tony cuts himself off, smoothing his hands over his thighs. “You seem- upset.”

“I am not.” She stops in her tracks, smoothing her hair behind her ears. “Truthfully. I am not-upset. I am simply- simply-” She searches for the word. “Restless. Not restless. I do not know the word at the moment. I am not upset.”

“Alright. Um. Is there- Can I do anything?”

“No. Yes. You are doing it. You are here.” She picks at the healing scabs on her hands. “You are here. I am not alone.” Loki scoffs, picking up the pace again. Her chest heaves as she breathes hard, like she’s run a marathon. “They mourn him. They mourn him as a hero.”

Tony remains silent, eyes drifting down to her hands again. They’re never going to heal at this rate. All the bites and the bruises and the friction burns from Loki trying to scrub her skin off have
healed, thanks to her enhanced healing abilities, but the hand-scabs remain. Solely, Tony is sure, because Loki won’t stop picking. She stops again, then strides over a little to the left, then comes to stand directly before Tony. He meets her wide green eyes.

“I killed him. You know this. I know you know this. I am at fault, and I regret nothing. She waits for Tony’s input, but he says nothing, so she rushes onwards, flexing her fingers. “It was the mistletoe. There was a rumor, that one thing had failed to promise, to make the promise. There was one thing. It was mistletoe. I was not sure, but what had I to lose? And I- I am free. I am free of him. He is gone and I am- am- I am free.”

Her voice breaks, and she seems absolutely shocked to find tears on her face, but once one comes, it’s like a dam breaking. She stumbles closer and holds herself back, furiously wiping away the tears as they fall. Tony looks around and yanks at the bedcover, holding it up as a barrier between Loki and himself. With some few exceptions, there’s still a no-touching rule in place. Loki sags into the blanket, and Tony bundles her onto the bed, which is no easy feat. For whatever fucking reason, these Asgardians are dense when they aren’t employing some sort of magical bullshit to reduce their weight without affecting mass.

Tony holds her close with the blanket between them and around her, and in return Loki stains his nightshirt with her salty tears. A hand sneaks out to rest over the reactor, which, okay. Tony is still very, very uncomfortable with that, but if Loki’s going to be vulnerable, he might as well be too.

“He’s gone,” she gasps. “Why does it still hurt? I thought- I thought it would stop hurting.”

And what do you say to that?

So Tony holds her, and rubs her back through the blanket while she clings to the reactor casing. He holds her until she’s sucking in shuddering, exhausted breaths and yeah. This? It’s been a long time coming.

“So maybe this isn’t the best time,” Tony prefaces. “But I, uh. I had a guy, once. I called him Obie. Uncle Obie. I mean, he wasn’t really my uncle. Just a good friend of my dad’s. Anyways, my dad died when I was twenty, and my mom pretty much- forgot how to live, when I was twenty two. She lived a hell of a lot longer than anyone predicted, but for all intents and purposes, she had died.”

Loki adjusts her head against the blanket on his shoulder, and he clears his throat.

“Anyways, Obie took over as my parental figure. I mean, I was an adult, but I wasn’t- I wasn’t really ready to take on the world, you know? Let alone take over the business empire my dad left behind. Obie always had my back. He helped me learn how to negotiate deals, thought everything I made was the world’s greatest invention, stood up for me in corporate meanings. He was… For a while, he was my world.

“And then, come to find out, whoopsie. He paid a bunch of guys to have me killed. Only, they didn’t kill me. They almost did. I mean, that’s why I’ve got this.” He taps the reactor between Loki’s fingers. “The attack left me with metal in my chest, and I had to build myself this little baby to keep on existing.”

“Your star,” Loki murmurs.

“Yeah, sure. That. No one knew where I was, so I built the first set of armor, and I blasted my way out. I watched the man who saved my life die. He didn’t want to live anymore, because his family had been murdered. Murdered using the weapons I made. So I swore, then, that my company was
done with weapons. We were moving strictly to defense and non-violent technology.

“Obie was pissed, because he was making a fuckton of money selling weapons to our enemies, killing the people I thought we were protecting. He tried to depose me, and then when that failed, he stole the pieces of my first Iron Man suit and built a new one, a bigger one. Then, because he needed something to power it, he ripped the reactor out of my chest. Left me there to die.”

Loki goes quiet, and her hand starts to slip off the reactor. Tony catches her hand in his and presses it back into place.

“But I didn’t die. I lived, because I had a spare, and I put on my armor, and I went to stop him.

“He killed the woman I loved, before I could do anything. I ended up blowing him all to fuck, but, uh. The damage had been done.”

The room is absolutely silent, save for the rustling sound of Loki adjusting her legs. Tony clears his throat again, to break the silence.

“So yeah. I, uh. I don’t know exactly what you went through, but I know a thing or two about uncles betraying you.”

“I- I must sound a fool,” Loki mutters. “So distressed by something as simple as sex, when you endured-”

“No, babe, no. Just- It’s not a competition, alright? I just thought- I trust you, and you trust me. I happen to care about you. A lot. I care- way more than I feel safe doing, and I just- You’re right. You aren’t alone.”

It takes a while for feathers to smooth, for palace life to return to normal. Or, somewhat normal. Thor and Odin still dress in their mourning clothes, but Mercel is back to her gaudy displays of wealth and status within three days, and while Frigga wears a black hair ribbon in deference to her husband’s sorrow, she refuses to let Baldur’s death dictate her actions otherwise. All is not well in the state of Asgard. The royal family seems to be dividing, as Mercel sits back and watches.

Around day four Loki demands Tony stop hovering and return to his scheduled lessons with Elder. Tony protests, loathe to abandon Loki so soon, but Loki stops and pinches the bridge of his nose, glaring at Tony.

“If I must hear you ask me if I’m fine once more, I will castrate you,” the prickly prince warns. “If you do not allow me space and go see your dragon, I may do so anyways.”

Tony remains reluctant, but Loki is boss. Loki wears the pants. So Tony visits a dragon.

Not a week later, though, Tony learns that he’s being sent away. Elder, somehow, has managed to secure him some sort of lesson in a place called Jotunheim, where he is to learn a technique known as cold-forging. Which sounds awesome. But this means, however, that he’s going to be gone for three whole weeks, and he’s growing into a possessive, protective bastard.

Cold-forging is amazing. Rather than using fire, for which fuel can be difficult to find in the icy expanses of the planet, the blue-skinned giants carve shallow grooves into ice and fill them with magic-charged water, well below the freezing point. The water is kept liquid by the energy of the magic within. This, apparently, means that whoever is forging the weapon or tool or whatever can also hand-draw sigils and runes of power. Take fucking that, Asgardian smiths. Tony knew there had to be a way to enchant things while forming them.
While bundled up in layer upon layer of furs on the antarctic planet, he learns. To tell the truth. Because yeah, he called bullshit when Loki started talking about the giants like they were beasts and monsters. It’s still another thing entirely to be sitting around a fire fueled by the oils rendered from some hunted animal, watching adult-man-sized children chasing each other, the delicate blue lines swooping across their body glinting in the firelight. It’s another thing entirely to sit with his temporary mentor as he feeds soup to his elderly bedridden grandmother. It’s another thing entirely to watch an infant be placed at the doors of the temple and left to be blessed by their goddess, then collected come morning.

He wants to bring Loki, show him everything he’s missing. Show him why those fairytales he told Tony aren’t the truth. Show him why- why the universe really would miss the giants, if they all vanished.

But he doesn’t get the chance, does he.

Loki is gone. Gone. God damn it. Every fucking time Tony turns his back, something else goes wrong.

He finds Frigga in her weaving room, sitting at her loom and wiping her eyes. She smiles, and greets Tony warmly, but her heart is heavy.

“What do you mean, ‘punished?’” Tony demands.

Frigga rubs her thumb into her palm.

“Odin thought that, perhaps, Hel- the queen of the dead- could be persuaded to return Baldur’s soul,” the queen explains. “I told him this would not be the case. Death dictates that Hel may not release any of her charges. To do so would- It is against the natural order. Yggdrasil would wither. And yet, Odin insisted on trying. Hel denied his request, and would not take any bargains.” She shakes her head. “She said that Baldur would only walk free when every living thing in existence wept. All the moss, all the animals, all the trees, all the people. Every disease and fungus and tiny little- Everything.”

“But that’s impossible, right?”

“Yes. But there were- there were whispers. Hel is Loki’s daughter, and there were some who thought Loki had demanded she not release Odin’s brother. Rumors spread, and ‘justice’ was demanded. Odin sentenced Loki- He-” She can’t seem to force out the words. “Once, I held power here. Once, I could have- Could have softened the blow.”

“Frigga, please. Please. Where is Loki?”

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When Tony bursts into his lab a few minutes later, all exhaustion from his travels forgotten, Frigga is behind him. The monkeys scatter as he storms over to the fully-functional Mark III armor and begins to put it on, piece by piece.

“Tony, what are you doing? You cannot attack Odin. You would have the armies of the Nine Realms baying for your blood!”

“I’m not going to attack him, Frigga. I’m just- I’m going to get Loki back.”

“Then why do you wear the armor?”
He looks at the queen, his mouth set into a hard line.

“Dress for success, your majesty. I’m going to get him back.”

Frigga searches his face, but he turns away, reaching for another leg panel. With a gentle touch, Frigga gains his attention.

Together, they have the armor on Tony within a half hour. It still feels like an eternity. Tony flips the faceplate down, as Frigga glides back out of the workshop, presumably heading down to the throne room.

“How nice to finally see you again, sir,” JARVIS snarks, obviously techy.

“Can it, J. Your vambrace is almost done; hold your horses. Look, we have an issue, and we’re going to fix it or be beaten to a bloody pulp trying. Alright?”

JARVIS quiets down quickly after that.

The key to winning a battle, Tony thinks, is make a kickass first impression. There’s a reason armies run screaming into war. So Tony supercharges the repulsors, the exhaust panels screaming like jet engines as he tears through the draped fabric blocking the throne room off from the outdoors. He’s pleased to note a distinct cracking of the floor’s stones when he clangs to a stop, standing straight and tall in his hotrod red armor. Odin’s one good eye is wide, his mouth open, as Mercel gears up towards rage at the rude entrance. The HUD picks out Frigga standing off behind the throne.

“Hey, Jackass,” Tony projects through the speakers. “We need to chat.”

“What is the meaning of this!” Odin booms, rising to his feet.

Tony disengages the helmet’s latches and pulls it off, tucking it away under his arm.

“Yeah, that’s kinda what I want to know as well,” he spits, stepping out of the small crater his landing made. The plates adjust and shift, mostly for theatrical effect. “Where do you get off on sentencing Loki, your goddamn son, to an eternity of torture!”

“His crimes are known. You forget yourself, Tony Stark of Nowhere.”

Clang, clang, clang, clang. Tony lets the boots hit the flagstones with all the weight he can muster as he strides up to the king. Odin holds his ground, which would usually be pretty admirable. Right now, Tony doesn’t give two shits.

“Oh, I think I know myself pretty damn well. So let’s see. What were his crimes again? Denying you the ability to bring back a dead man? Oh, hmm. Looks like that wasn’t Loki. That looks like it was the decision of someone named Death, who then instructed Hel, the keeper of the dead to tell you no. And rather than sucking it up and accepting you aren’t all-powerful, you decide to listen to gossip. Oh wow, how brave of you!”

Tony makes no mention of Loki’s hand in Baldur’s murder. If he had known about the plot, Tony’s pretty damn sure he wouldn’t have denied Loki his one chance at escape. And if no one else in Asgard knows, then so be it.

“You will respect your king,” Mercel barks.

“He’s not my king. Or did you forget the part where I’m from ‘Nowhere’?”
“Why do you defend him?” Odin demands.

Tony leans in close, so that he’s eye to eye with the king.

“Because no one else fucking will.”

“He has a right to demand a trial by combat, on behalf of Loki,” Frigga pipes up. Mercel grins.

“Oh, wonderful. It’s been awhile since I’ve seen a mortal’s blood spilled.”

“You would stand as his champion?”

“Goddamn right I will. I demand a trial by combat. Me and my armour, against whoever your champion is.”

Odin smiles.

Chapter End Notes

The rating is probably going to go up to mature, to accommodate my describing certain injuries and violence in detail. Not in this chapter, or the next, but Loki isn’t doing too hot right now.

Comments are especially adored, and kudos are lovely too!
It takes a full day for preparations to be made. Frigga takes Tony to the arena, to give him a chance to familiarize himself with his battlefield. The ground is semi-packed dirt, similar to the practice ground Thor received his goats on. High constructions around the oval field house seating, with boxes set up, presumably for people of high rank.

Like the king.

Tony paces around the edge of the field. With any luck, he won’t be stuck on the ground too long. He’ll have to ration his projectile ammunition, given that he hadn’t seen the need to create more in the time after arriving in Asgard. Repulsor beams and physical blows will have to suffice.

“Tony.”

Thor’s low, gravelly voice draws the inventor out of his musings. He turns to face the prince, who is, surprisingly, alone.

“Oh, hey Point Break.”

Thor rests a hand on the handle of Volund, his mouth set into a grim line.

“I am to be your opponent, tomorrow.”

Huh. That’s- Hmm. In some ways good, in some ways bad. Tony doesn’t want to beat the shit out of Thor, but maybe he’ll take it easy on Tony, given that he’s fighting to free Thor’s brother.

As if reading Tony’s mind, Thor shakes his head minutely, scraping at the dirt with his toe.

“You must not pull your blows, when we meet on the field of battle,” Thor warns. “If I am not seen to fight my best fight, questions will be raised as to the validity of this trial. If questions are raised, a new champion will be chosen. Most likely, a Destroyer.”

“Destroyer?”

“Animated armor. They guard the vaults of Asgard, but in times of need… They are formidable weapons. I believe you have a greater chance of winning against me, although-” Thor grimaces. “The fight will not be to the death. Not by necessity, anyways. You are mortal, Tony Stark of Nowhere, and I have no wish to kill you. If your armor proves unworthy, I pray you submit.”

Tony makes a disgusted sound, tucking his thumbs into the sash around his waist.
“Uh, yeah. I can’t exactly say there’s ever been a time in my life when I submitted in a fight. Not exactly planning on starting now.”

“Listen to me, Tony. Mother is currently distraught, but she never fails to talk sense into my Father given time. This will be no different, and you need not risk your life against a god. Loki is resilient, but he will need you when he returns. You must-”

“Oh fuck off, alright? I’m not in the mood for this. I’m not going to sit on my ass and let nature take its course. He’s been chained below a fountain of acid, big guy. He doesn’t exactly have time.” In the interest of full disclosure, Tony would have blasted off to go get his person back as soon as humanly able, but this is one of those instances where magic can be a pain in the ass. Odin’s apparently able to hide a place, to prevent certain people from ever finding it, without his express permission. Tony supposes he should be flattered he was included on that list of people, alongside Frigga and her side of the family. Mostly, he’s just nursing a coal of burning hot fury in his chest. “Why the fuck did everyone want Baldur back anyways, huh? He was a goddamn monster.”

Thor’s face clouds in anger.

“Speak not of my uncle in this way, Tony,” he warns. “I do not agree with Father’s decision to place all blame solely on Loki, but Baldur was a prince of Asgard, and a fine warrior.”

“He was a rapist,” Tony dismisses. He feels a twinge of regret, for outing Loki’s assault without the prince’s permission, but in for a penny, in for a pound. “Bet you didn’t know that, huh? He’s been terrorizing your brother for at least four hundred years. Did you even notice, or were you too busy fawning over that fucker? You honestly want to tell me that in four hundred plus years, you never once thought maybe there was something awful going on?”

Without the suit, Tony wouldn’t dare go up against Thor, but the prince looks like he’s been slapped.

“Surely you are mistaken. Baldur was too noble a soul to-”

“Look, the truth hurts. It’s awful, and it sucks, and it’s hard to hear, but you-” He jabs Thor in the chest. “-have to decide what you’re gonna do with it. I know I have, and I am not backing the fuck down.”

Tony adjusts the sleeves of his red leather jacket, refusing to break eye contact with the buff ginger until he brushes past the prince. There’s something in Thor’s blue eyes, the tiniest seed of doubt, but it’s enough. Maybe something good will grow from that seed.

Tony spends the rest of the day tinkering. He finally manages to transfer JARVIS’s consciousness from the armor to the sleek red leather vambrace, inlaid with gold-titanium alloy and set with a deep yellow citrine, while maintaining his connection to the suit. The next step is working on allowing JARVIS to project himself as a body, but for now, Tony will settle for the AI being able to project an illusion of his voice into Tony’s ear.

Tony adjusts the gauntlet for his left arm to account for the vambrace’s presence. The work occupies all of his attention, so he doesn’t exactly notice someone come in. He startles violently when Frigga’s light hand waves into his line of sight rather than touching him.

“Fuck- I mean- yeah. I’ll go with fuck. You scared the shit out of me,” Tony gasped, pressing a hand to the reactor.
“I apologize, Tony. However, I must insist you sleep now.” He twists around to look at her.

“I can’t, Frigga. I’ve got to- to make sure everything’s ready.”

“Which you have been doing for the past seven hours. You will be of no use if you show up to your battle exhausted.”

“But I-”

“Sir, all systems are fully operational. Moreover, mechanical efficiency has peaked. I predict there to be a .03% chance that you could improve anything more tonight.”

Frigga cocks her head, glancing around the room.

“Who is that?”

Tony scrubs a hand across his face and taps on the vambrace. Cheeky shit.

“JARVIS. He’s, uh. He’s my artificial intelligence. Loki calls him a construct. I moved him over to the vambrace so I could keep him with me rather than leaving him trapped in the suit.”

“Well, I suppose we ought to listen to JARVIS, hmm? A .03% chance is not a good one.”

“Yeah, but it’s not zero, so-”

“Bed. Go to bed, Tony.” She reaches out to cup his face in her soft, warm hand, and rather than flinching away, Tony leans into the touch. “Loki will need you at your best.”

And damn her, she’s right. He’s just- too wired-up to sleep. Frigga solves this dilemma by providing him with tea. Tony makes a face of disgust, but when he tries it, he finds it- sweet, and almost spicy.

Of course it’s not exactly a tea he thinks he should be drinking with any frequency, because it knocks him out within ten minutes.

There are nightmares, because of course there are, but while he wipes the sweat off his face come morning, he can’t afford to dwell. Breakfast is a small, light affair designed to provide him with energy but not weigh him down, and then it’s up to the workshop to suit up. The armor clicks and whirs into place around him, and the monkeys are all lined up neatly on his workbench, watching. Technically Tony could return them to their inert mural form whenever he leaves, but it feels- not quite right. Tony know they aren’t technically alive, but they have such vibrant personalities. It feels wrong to treat them like inanimate tools.

He gives them each a scratch behind their rounded ears before taking off out the open archways leading to the outside air. Immediately, a small flock of crows converges on him, like his own little escort. Admittedly, he probably looks incredibly stupid surrounded by birds, but it feels badass. They disperse as he banks downwards, rocketing towards the ground. He pulls up, lightens his landing, because that whole earth-shattering intimidation tactic?

Not exactly easy on the knees.

The attendant waiting for him to guide him to his entry point watches the suit warily, flinching noticeably when Tony turns his glowing eyes on the poor soul. His throat bobs as he gulps.

“This way, Tony Stark of Nowhere.”
Behind the helmet, Tony can’t help but grin. Oh, so that’s a name that’s sticking now, is it? There are worse things to be called. At least he’s not associated with ‘death’ here.

Tony is brought before a set of gilded doors that open outward and told to wait for a signal.

“Odin Allfather will announce you and your opponent, and the doors will open simultaneously,” the attendant explains. “You will walk out and stop at the painted line, and there you will stay until the Allfather tells you to begin. After that, the trial will take place. The victor is he who remains standing, through whatever means necessary. Do you understand?”

“Yep!” He pops the ‘p’, flicking a lazy salute at the attendant. “Wish me luck?”

The attendant seems a bit taken aback, and he shuffles, glancing down at his feet before back up at Tony.

“May the best man win,” he allows. “And may justice take its course.”

Justice indeed.

A series of chimes reverberate through the air, and the doors swing outward. Tony rubs a metal-encased hand over the reactor, and steps out. He keeps his head held high as he struts into the arena, while Thor does the same across from him. The arena is packed with spectators. How they all managed to come out with a day’s notice, Tony doesn’t know, but the sound rolls over him in waves. JARVIS analyzes it, and, save for a few spikes, generally neutralizes the noise.

Tony and Thor face off in the dead center of the arena, and together they turn to Odin’s viewing platform. Frigga stands off to the right corner, her hands settled on the glimmering railing, while Mercel has herself perched on Odin’s lap, combing her fingers through his beard, though she leaves her seat long enough to let Odin stand.

There’s a grand speech- listing Loki’s perceived crimes, announcing Thor and all his honorifics and kennings, announcing Tony as Tony Stark of Nowhere, the Man of Iron. Odin gives the terms of combat, that the first to submit is the loser, and then the crystal-bright chimes ring again. Thor and Tony turn their backs to each other, take twenty paces, and wait. Tony maybe has a little bit of an advantage, with his proximity sensors showing Thor’s general location.

Dark clouds gather overhead, and Odin roars, “Begin!”

Tony turns around just in time to have Volund crash into his chestplate, sending him flying backwards. Thor advances on him slowly, cautiously, as the hammer glides back into his hand. Tony rolls over and pushes himself onto his knees.

“Ohay,” he mutters to himself. “Let’s play.”

The hammer makes a thunderous noise as Thor swings it in loops, and Tony twists and slams him with a repulsor blast. Thor stumbles back a step, and Tony immediately follows up by flying directly into the prince, kicking out his feet to catch Thor in the chest. The ginger goes skidding across the arena, digging a furrow into the semi-packed dirt.

“You don’t want to do this, Thor,” he projects, widening his stance and raising his gauntlets for another warning shot.

“Nay, but I must,” comes the gravely response. Thor thrusts his hammer into the sky, and a bolt of lightning comes rocketing down, striking the hammer and heating it to a glowing white. Tony takes a step back, eyes wide behind his face plate. That’s- unexpected. He knows they call Thor the
Thunderer, but, uh- He hasn’t seen the lightning part in action.

He sees it in action now. Lightning arcs off Volund and crackles over the suit, forcing Tony to stagger. The HUD flashes, blazing with light, and Tony reaches out with what he calls his magic fingers, the metaphysical whatever he uses to manipulate magic, and directs the lightning, because, uh- yeah. He’d rather not be Tony-popcorn. The energy flows around him, dancing across his skin and making his hair stand on end, and when the blast subsides, the HUD dims for a moment before flashing back to life.

“Sir, energy at 400% capacity,” JARVIS announces, and Tony can see the percentage in red ticking all the way up to 425% from the corner of his eye.

“Well how ‘bout that.”

He launches himself at Thor, aiming a punch at his jaw, but the prince shifts, and Tony ends up clipping his lip, red metal splitting skin. Thor beats him with the hammer, snapping Tony’s head to the side, and he engages the repulsors, driving Thor back and into the stone wall of the arena. Thor rips free and takes off into the air, swinging Volund like a goddamn propeller, and Tony jets up to follow. They regard each other warily, a respectable distance between them, but almost in sync, they dive, colliding and clashing. Thunder rolls over the arena, bolstering the roaring crowd.

Thor smashes him out of the air, and Tony rolls over to take the brunt of the impact on his back. The suit’s left shoulder is damaged, limiting his range of motion, but he’ll make due. The actual joint is curiously numb.

“Charge up the unibeam,” he snaps as Thor lands on the ground, prowling towards him. He remains on his back, looking for all the world like he’s been disabled, but when Thor stands over him he lets the unibeam loose. Thor catches it in the chest and throat, and he arches away, leaving behind the smell of singed leather. Tony clambers back to his feet as Thor thuds to the earth, but the prince rolls back upright as though it was nothing. “Oh come the fuck on!”

New tactic. Tony flies towards Thor again, seeking to bring the fight up to close quarters. If Thor doesn’t have room to swing, he can do less harm with the hammer. Meanwhile, Tony can punch the shit out of the prince.

It works, for a few seconds. Thor tries to bring Volund up; Tony deflects the blow with his forearm, returns the favor with three messy punches to the face. Thor kicks Tony away and takes a moment to wipe the blood pouring into his eye from a cut on his brow. There’s little point. He’s bleeding from the nose and lip too. Tony isn’t bleeding as much, but he’s definitely battered, and his shoulder definitely feels fucked, now that he’s thinking about it.

Tony switches to drastics. Thor is right-handed, so Tony targets the right arm. Thor takes a swing, and Tony catches the prince’s arm between the elbow-joint and his side. With a vicious pull, Tony hears a snap, and Volund hits the ground as Thor is forced to let go. The ginger stumble away, breathing hard, but his eyes are fierce, and he tucks his right arm to his chest, reaching out with his left hand for the hammer.

And of course Thor is ambidextrous.

Tony is rewarded for his stunt with the hammer coming down on his head, and it’s probably only JARVIS locking the neck plates that saves him from having a snapped neck. Tony still goes down like a sack of bricks, and he engages the repulsors to skid across the ground, putting distance between himself and the prince. He ends up rolled over on his stomach when the HUD alerts him to a projectile approaching.
Tony twists up, hand lashing out in an instinctive bid to protect himself, and the hammer connects with his palm. The force sends an unpleasant jolt up his arm, but he digs his fingers in, gripping the metal with every goddamn thing he’s got. He feels a tug as Thor attempts to recall the weapon, but Tony grits his teeth and digs in. On one knee, arm extended out in front of him, Tony tightens his grip. There’s a weird thrum in the reactor, which Tony can only assume means he’s taxing the device, so he needs to end this soon. The strange sensation hums up his arm, into the tips of his fingers, and he realizes in a moment: he can end this now.

He pulls on the hammer against Thor, clenching his fingers like he’s trying to make a fist. When the first crack appears, Thor’s eyes widen. Like a spiderweb of shattering glass, cracks radiate from Tony’s grasping fingers, and the metal starts to give and buckle. With a snap of blinding light and an acoustic blast fit to flatten a forest, the hammer shatters.

When Tony next stands, shards of metal fall from his hand, and the handle of Thor’s hammer punches down into the dirt.

The arena is silent.

“Your move, Charming,” Tony announces flatly. His voice carries, echoes, rebounds.

Thor charges him, unwilling or unable to forfeit, but all Tony does is flip the prince onto his back, holding him in place with a knee to the gut while he punches the god again and again and again.

“Go to sleep, go to sleep, go to sleep, go to sleep,” he chants to himself, and when finally Thor’s head lolls back, his eyes rolling up, Tony stops mid-swing. He retracts the gauntlet enough to check for a pulse and, satisfied that he hasn’t killed Loki’s brother, he drops the thunderer and stands, turning to face a dumbstruck Odin.

The repulsors bring him up into the air, and he drifts over, setting down on the royal viewing platform.

“I win,” he announces, lifting the faceplate. “You know my terms.”

The king is livid, and Mercel traces her fingers across his neck, but Odin brushes her away to stand on his own two feet.

“You-” Odin sways, his eyes going a little glassy as he looks around, but he regains his composure almost immediately. It’s clear that Odin wants nothing more than to deny Tony his reward, but before an arena full of people? His hands are tied. “You- Damn you. Damn you to Hel’s embrace!” he spits.

Within the hour, Tony has a map, and a horse (he’s not thrilled about that part), and a magical pack full of provisions. He’s been forbidden to use the bifrost, but Frigga has provided him her mare. Thor even stumbles into the stables, pursued by a very frazzled Eir, and presents Tony with a tiny little bag that supposedly contains Thor’s tent, for when he goes on adventures.

“Save my brother,” he slurs. “You are a noble warrior, Tony Stark.”

Tony bites his lip, and pats Thor awkwardly on the arm not tied down by a splint.

“Thanks, big guy. Um. How’s the head?”

Thor’s face looks like one big bruise. That’s what happens when you give Tony an overpowered suit, he supposes.
“Marvelous!”

Thor returns the gesture and smacks his hand down on Tony’s shoulder- the left one, unfortunately. Tony nearly buckles at the stab of pain that causes him. Without the suit holding him together, sensation had rushed back into the shoulder- and it hadn’t been any sort of good sensation. Taking off the damaged armor had actually dislocated the joint, and while Tony had popped it back into place already, he was fairly certain something might have been torn.

Eir picks up on this instantly, and she turns her attentions from Thor, who’s distracting himself by petting the horse, to Tony. She waves a gold door knob-looking thing over his shoulder and frowns at the readout on her crystal display.

“Tony Stark, you require attention,” she groused.

“I’m really, really sorry, Eir, but I don’t have the time.”

“Prince Loki can wait a moment more.”

“No, he can’t!” he snaps, startling the healer. He runs his good hand through his sweaty hair. “I’m not leaving him under a fountain of fucking acid for one second longer than I have to. Take care of Thor, and leave me alone.”

It’s embarrassing, after his little tirade, but Tony needs help getting up into the saddle. Fortunately, it’s Frigga who aids him, while Eir watches in displeasure as a prospective patient gets away. Frigga takes Tony by the hand, once he’s situated.

“Thank you,” Frigga says softly, with untold sincerity behind her words. “You have saved my son in more ways than I can tell you.”

There’s something oddly full about what she says, but Tony doesn’t have time to dwell. He clumsily guides the horse out of the courtyard. The mare’s hooves clatter on the stone streets as she trots off, jostling his shoulder, but he’ll manage. He has to. When he passes a familiar street, Tony makes a split second decision. He isn’t above begging. Not in this.

Tony finds himself in Idunn’s gardens, before long, and the brown-skinned goddess greets him with curious eyes.

“I need apples,” Tony announces.

“You know I cannot provide them for you.”

“I know but- Look, they aren’t for me. You’ve heard about Loki, right? Right. Well, I’m going to get him back, and he’s not- He’s probably going to be in shit shape when I find him, alright? I’m not a doctor, but those apples? I think they might be able to help him.”

Idunn gives Tony a long, hard look. The seconds trickle away like grains of precious sand, before she nods sharply. Tony clambers off the horse, and Idunn catches him by the wrist.

“You must swear to me, Tony. Swear that you will not partake of the apples. Guarding this orchard is my sacred duty, and my life’s work. Swear to me that you will not have me violate my duties.”

“I promise, Idunn. I swear. The only one who’s going to ‘partake’ is Loki.”

She leads him back to the orchard, where she picks a bagful of shining golden apples, as bright and yellow as gold leaf. A jug of juice is pressed into his hands as well.
“Idunn, I could kiss you right now. If, you know, I didn’t think Unnur would punch my teeth in for it. Thank you. Thank you.”

Idunn waves her hand, her eyes tight and worried.

“Go find your prince. As you say, he needs help. Feed him the apples when he is well enough to eat. Treat his wounds with the juice.”

He uses the edge of one of her raised garden beds to pull himself back onto the mare, and with another word of parting thanks, he leaves.

The ride is long. According to Odin and Frigga both, by horseback at a moderate pace, the floating prison in which Loki is being held is three days away, and Tony doesn’t dare ride faster. It’s still so fucking slow.

It’s just a desperate game, at first. Reaching out to Loki. He knows the rule is that you can’t teleport somewhere you haven’t been before, but something clicks. The threads he felt, when Loki took him to collect the goats. He reaches out and startles to realize— he can feel them. What’s more, he can read them. Tony pulls the mare to a halt in the fading light and reaches out physically as well, as if that will help him direct his metaphysical ‘fingers’ too as they strum over thread after thread, like stroking a tapestry, or playing a harp. This one— it leads somewhere hot, and rocky, and dark. That one goes somewhere cold and empty, like the blankness of space. Another he knows without knowing how would bring him back to Frigga’s weaving room.

If he had to take a guess, he would say there’s a thread for every individual point in the universe, but Tony doesn’t care to guess at the moment. He doesn’t even care to wonder at why the hell he’s now breaking one of the supposed laws of magic.

He just wants Loki.

There’s a handful of threads that Tony knows will take him there, and he takes hold, pulls. There’s that strange thrumming sensation around the reactor again, but with a flash of pale blue, he and the horse and everything he brought with him— it’s all on a grassy asteroid floating high above the ground. Tony doesn’t recognize the sandy terrain below, but the asteroid is one of many— some the size of basketballs, some the size of buildings, but all covered in grass and flowers. There’s a gash in the surface of this one, the mouth to a cave, and a woman with platinum hair creeps out, a deep clay bowl clasped in her hands.

“Who are you?” Tony demands roughly, working his way out of the saddle, onto the ground. The woman startles violently, her fingers taking a white-knuckled grip on the bowl. She swallows.

“I am Sigyn, sir,” she replies, her voice wavering. “I have no quarrel with you. Let me continue on with my self-appointed task.”

“Sigyn? Loki’s Sigyn?” Tony can’t help the surprise in his voice. “I know Loki too. I’m here to help him. What’s in that bowl?”

Sigyn kneels and pours the contents of the bowl out onto the grass, and the milky white liquid inside eats away at the grass and through the top layer of organic matter, leaving behind another scorched patch of stone like the many Tony now sees littered around the mouth of the cave.

“Fuck.”
Why yes. Yes I did reference three different movies in one chapter. *Still* haven't seen Ragnarok, but oh my god, Hel shattering Mjolnir? Such a power move.
Sigyn leads Tony into the heart of the grassy asteroid. The air is damp and dark, lit only by the torches Sigyn brought with her from home. She tells him, as they pick their way over a patch of boulders, that while she and Loki split apart many years ago, they remain friends, albeit estranged ones. When she heard of Loki’s punishment, Sigyn tells him, she couldn’t bring herself to leave Loki to his fate. Hence her steadfast dedication to shielding the prince with her clay bowl.

When Tony sees Loki, he stops in his tracks and allows himself just a handful of seconds to compose himself. Falling to his knees and emptying his stomach isn’t exactly going to help anyone. Sigyn scurries back into place and holds her bowl beneath the steady drip drip drip of cloudy acid slipping from a pair of stalactites. Beneath, Loki is bound in chains, utterly naked against a stone slab. His arms stretch above his head, and Tony can see where his ankles have been rubbed raw and bloody struggling against the bonds above his feet. Loki is so painfully still, only the rapid, shallow rise and fall of his chest indicating any sort of life.

He looks like a corpse. The acid trickling over his face and body has eaten away skin and fat in honeycomb patterns, exposing muscle and sinew and bone beneath. Tony can clearly see the prince’s teeth through his cheek, and more besides. The paths taken by each drop are marked in angry, bloody, eaten-away red.

Tony withdraws the laser cutter he brought with him, and approaches, swallowing thickly. He works quickly and calmly, though his hands shake as the chains are broken. Tony leaves the manacles in place for now, more worried about removing Loki from the slab than anything.

“He help me move him,” Tony demands when the final link snaps. Sigyn hesitates where she is, still holding the bowl, but Tony drags Loki out of the way, offering a silent apology for the scrapes he knows this causes. Sigyn casts her bowl away, and it shatters in the distance as she gingerly grabs Loki under the knees.

Tony catches his friend under the shoulders, and together he and Sigyn maneuver the silent prince out of the cave, and into the cool night air. He curses his lack of foresight now. He should have asked Eir for medical supplies. All he has are golden apples.

He and Sigyn lay Loki out on a blanket, careful to touch as few of the deep acid burns as possible. Tony takes out the juice and offers a silent prayer to whoever the fuck is listening. Apple juice isn’t exactly anything close to a good wound treatment, but these are Idunn’s magic, immortality-granting apples, and she said to use the juice to treat Loki’s wounds. He soaks a cloth in the juice, and lays it across the partially-stripped flesh of Loki’s ribs, where Tony can see wet bone. Loki thrashes, an awful, inhuman scream tearing from his ruined throat.

“I’ll hold him down,” Tony snaps, thrusting the juice into Sigyn’s hands. “Keep- keep doing what I was doing. Idunn said it would help.”

He scrambles around to catch Loki’s wrists, pulling them up beside Loki’s head to prevent the uncoordinated jerking of the prince’s arms from impeding Sigyn. There’s still the matter of his uncontrolled legs, but Tony things he can do more good at this end.

“Hey there, Lo,” he soothes, transferring the hold of Loki’s wrists to one hand. He pets Loki’s
tangled hair, careful to avoid his damaged face. The prince convulses again as Sigyn lays out another clean, juice-soaked cloth. “You’re safe now, do you hear me? I’ve got you.”

Cloudy, unseeing green eyes stare up at Tony, utterly unfocused and bloodshot. Another painful keening sob breaks his goddamn heart, and Tony pulls down the collar of his tunic to reveal the reactor. The tug is painful on the back of his neck, but Tony presses Loki’s captured hands against the casing. Feeble fingers dig into the scarred skin around it.

“It’s me, babe. I’ve got you. I’ve got you, sweetheart. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, got it? You’re safe.”

Whether from Tony’s babbling or his own exhaustion, Tony doesn’t know, but Loki stills as the minutes go by, though he continues to flinch and gasp and whine every time a new cloth finds its way against his skin. When Loki passes out completely, Tony doesn’t blame him. He takes the juice back from Sigyn and balls up a cloth, soaking it through. Then he begins to dab at the burns on Loki’s face and neck, careful not to block the prince’s breathing at any time.

Between the two of them, they soak Loki’s extensive injuries in golden apple juice, which is a start. What Loki really needs is a doctor, and a hospital or clinic or something. Not a blanket on a grassy rock, underneath the open sky. Tony doesn’t bother with Thor’s tent. He doesn’t have the heart to move his friend, to cause him any more pain.

Sigyn accepts the wrapped bread and meats and fruit when Tony offers, but the man himself doesn’t think he can stomach anything. He sits beside Loki, aching to reach out and brush the lines of tension from the prince’s face while knowing to do so would be to torture Loki further. Sigyn sleeps not far away, exhausted after days on end spent awake and tending to her former husband. Tony buries his face in his hands.

“I know I said it wasn’t a competition, but between you and me? I think your family is way more f**ked up than mine ever dreamed of being,” he mutters, digging the heels of his palms into his eyes. His shoulder radiates heat, and the sleeve of his tunic feels far too tight to be healthy, but there’s nothing for it at the moment.

When he looks up again, he goes very, very still.

“Um, hi?” he ventures, perplexed as he watched the crow before him. The crow with the little white ‘eyebrow’. “What the f**k are you doing here?”

Dave hops forwards once, a little white scroll pinched in her beak, and makes a throaty chuffing sound. She struts closer and extends her neck a bit, offering up the scroll. Tony takes it, still eying the crow with suspicion. Last time he checked, Dave wasn’t any sort of messenger bird.

He pulls the ivory string holding it shut, and the scroll unfurls.

It’s a poem.

“You brought me a poem?”

Dave cocks her head. Tony sighs and sets the paper down beside him, rubbing his eyes again. He’ll think about it in the morning. Dave is having none of that, though. She picks the paper up in her beak again and taps his thigh with the tops of her toes, growling at him again.

“Look, not now, okay? I don’t know where you got that from, but I don’t have time to read poetry.”

She explodes upwards, startling Tony into falling flat on his back as he flinches away from the
flurry of feathers. Dave hops up onto his chest and places one foot on his chin, the paper still clasped in her beak. The little white tuft over her eye seems to dare him to deny her again.

“What the hell’s gotten into you?” he grumbles, snatching the paper away. Tony holds the poem up to the sky, and the words glisten and rearrange themselves in the light of the arc reactor. They shift from English to those runes the Asgardians favor, and then back to English again. Tony glances down at the bird on his chest again, then sighs. He reads the words out loud, unfurling more of the scroll as need be. It doesn’t make a lot of sense to him, talking to some Queen (capital Q, apparently) and asking for keys, but when he finishes, he drops the paper again.

“What? Happy?”

Dave caws in his face and takes flight, leaving him alone in the near-silence. He can hear Loki’s labored, rasping, whistley breaths beside him, can hear the nightbirds and insects trilling elsewhere, but otherwise-

It’s peaceful.

A spark of light behind him draws Tony’s attention, and he rolls over, coming up to his knees and biting back a pained noise as the movement puts pressure on his shoulder, however briefly. Like someone taking a sparkler stick and tracing patterns through the air on a long-capture photo, four crackling points of light fizz to life. Tony’s eyes flick to Sigyn, and he scrambles over, shaking the blonde woman awake.

“What is it?” she demands muzzily, then suddenly snaps to attention. “Is Loki alright?”

“Yeah, just- look at that.”

They watch as the four sparkling points move through the air, leaving behind glowing trails that deepen with each pass. The lines form two rectangular shapes, with the top of each curved upwards. Tony rises to his feet as the shapes come together and solidify, taking on color and mass until- well. They look an awful lot like doors stained a dark, deep purple. Tony puts himself between the doors and Loki, and they open outwards. No light pours out. In fact, beyond the doors in nothing but pitch darkness, but from that darkness steps a woman.

Her hair is a familiar tangle of black curls, and she seems to have been bisected right down the middle. On one side, her skin is alabaster white, her bones prominent beneath paper-thin flesh, while the other side is full and dark blue, with yet more of those intriguing lines swooping across her body on the blue side. The blue half sports a ruby-red eye, while the other one is green. Her body is draped in a fluid lilac dress. Behind her, two people follow- a man and a woman. They are washed out and dull, like sun-faded projections, and Tony can nearly see right through them.

“Tony Stark,” she greets, and her voice is warm and rich. To his right, Sigyn’s head is bowed, but Tony won’t look away, wary of this newcomer. “I’m so pleased to finally meet you.”

“I, uh- I’d say the same, but I don’t exactly- who are you?”

Bone-white teeth flash behind the woman’s full lips.

“I am Hel Lokidottr, and I promise you, I mean you no harm.”

Hel. He remembers that name from Frigga’s explanation of why Loki was condemned. The queen of the dead. Dave swoops in to settle on the top of the staff Hel carries, and Tony stares at her in surprise.
“Oh. Um. Hi, I guess.” Tony takes a step back, towards his prone companion. “You can’t have him.”

Hel smiles, though there’s a hint of worry in there.

“Believe me when I say I don’t intend to keep him, but my father needs medical attention beyond what you can provide with Idunn’s gift. Please, help us move him to my infirmary. Time is of the essence.”

The woman-ghost produces what looks like a floating stretcher, and she sidesteps around Tony, who simply turns to watch, a frown etched deep into his face. The man-ghost helps her lift Loki onto the stretcher, and the prince remains unresponsive. As they drift past Tony again, he reaches out and catches the side of the stretcher.

“Wait. I’m coming too.”

Hel inclines her head.

“Of course. But you—” the queen turns to Sigyn, who bows. “Oh, none of that. It’s only— I’m bending the rules enough by letting the living come with me. I’m afraid you must return home now.” Hel approaches Sigyn, whose shoulders have slumped ever so slightly. A blue hand touches Sigyn’s. “He’s doing so well, Sigyn. You’ll see him again, and he will love you nonetheless.”

The blonde woman nods, a watery smile on her lips.

“Thank you,” she whispers, before straightening her spine. “I will see to your horse, Tony. It was a pleasure meeting you. I merely wish it could have been under different circumstances.”

And just like that, they part ways. There’s a little curl of jealousy threatening to make itself known in Tony’s chest, given Hel’s parting words to Sigyn, but there’s something that doesn’t fit, if she was talking about Loki. Loki is most certainly not doing well.

He follows Hel and her ghosts through the doors, and the inky blackness sticks to him like putty, reluctant to release him as he passes through the other side. He finds himself in a courtyard, and it’s extremely disorienting. Everything around him seems to be in grayscale, from the flowers climbing the stone walls to the stained glass. The muted colors of the ghosts can’t compare to the bleeding red of Loki’s skin, or the vibrant blue of Hel’s left half. The rippling lilac dress he’d seen on the other side of the door is now just as washed out and grey as everything else.

Hel catches him looking around in bewilderment, and she smiles.

“Welcome to Niflheim, or Helheim, if you prefer. Originally, they were two planets, but by the time I came to power, they had merged. It makes naming very confusing, I know. Come, we really mustn’t dally.”

It’s then that Tony notices the ghosts taking Loki away. Dave hops down from Hel’s staff to find her perch on Tony’s shoulder. Tony tries to go after Loki, but Hel stops him.

“Believe me, he will receive the best of care. Eir’s mentor is a subject of mine, now, and she will not let further harm come to my father. We will visit him later, when he is not in so much pain. Walk with me, Tony. I would like us to become acquainted.”

Tony is reluctant to let Loki out of his sight, especially with the prince in such a vulnerable state, but Hel has a hand on his elbow, and though he wants to pull away, something tells him not to cross her.
Together they walk through colorless stone halls. There’s something off about it all, like the corners of his vision are distorted or blurred, but Hel assures him that it is nothing more than her realm adjusting to the presence of the living.

“You aren’t really supposed to be here, but I have been so good, and my Lady has decided to allow me this. That’s why I sent you the incantation,” she explains, leading Tony into a sunroom. Everything in Tony’s experience tells him that the flower arrangements on each of the little tables should be brightly-colored, but instead they’re either silver, copper, or glimmering gold. Tony touches the petal of a copper rose, and it feels just as delicate as any other flower he’s touched in his life. “Psychopomps may not interact directly with the living. Some sort of medium must be used, like my crows, or a seer. Of course, if the living call to us, we may decide whether to answer, but that is another matter entirely.”

Tony meets Hel’s eyes as they sit down by one of the windows overlooking a sea of grey mist. Despite the blanket of clouds above them, the room is well-lit.

“Your crows?”

“Oh yes. Odin has his ravens, Death her rooks, and I my crows.” She holds out her pale hand for Dave to clamber on, then brinds the bird close to stroke her fingers through Dave’s feathers. “I name them all, you know. After crystals, usually. Oh I love rocks and crystals. Fluorite, Smoky Quartz, Sapphire, Chrysocolla— Hel grins. “And then there’s Dave. I wonder how that happened.”

Tony has the good grace to look mildly embarrassed.

“In all fairness, I didn’t know she belongs to you.”

Dave chuffs in her chest, ruffling her feathers and puffing up into a little ball.

“I am not opposed to loaning her out from time to time, you needn’t worry. Now, I have been led to believe that you are the creator of a very ingenious construct. Is this true?”

Tony strokes a finger over the vambrace housing JARVIS, which is just as grey and colorless as every other thing. The cut citrine he has embedded in the leather, though— that’s still yellow. Which, now that he thinks about it, is odd.

“Yeah. Say hello to the nice queen of death, Jay.”

“Greetings, Queen Hel. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Hel’s vibrant eyes light up in delight, and she reaches out for the vambrace.

“May I?”

Tony hesitates, but he unbuckles the leather and passes it across the table to the queen. Hel fingers the citrine and turns the vambrace over in her hands.

“Remarkable. You know, you’re the first construct I’ve seen to have a soul,” she confides, speaking directly to JARVIS.

“I will take that as a compliment, madame. Thank you,” JARVIS replies in his crisp accent.

Hel examines the miniscule latticework of painted runes and sigils Tony sealed into the inner layer of padded leather. Tony, for his part, isn’t entirely sure how to take the interaction. There’s a spike
of protectiveness and possessiveness that sears his insides, at seeing a person whose literal job is to collect souls, handling his baby Jay. He holds his tongue, though, and waits for Hel to return JARVIS’s housing. The buckles tighten around his arm again, and once more JARVIS is back where he belongs, with his maker.

A relatively solid ghost brings a tray of what smells- miracle of miracles- like coffee. They set the tray down and pour both Tony and Hel a cup of that liquid magic, but Tony hesitates to drink. Hel smiles again, seeming to guess his discomfort.

“You will not find yourself trapped here if you eat or drink of what I have to offer, this I promise you. In fact, I believe it would be foolish indeed for you to deny yourself. I have the feeling that you will be my guest for quite some time.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” he demands.

“Only that my father now faces a long road to recovery, even for someone with his natural healing capabilities. Drink. We will be summoned when Father is fit for visitors.”

Tony deflates at that reminder, and he tightens his fingers around the round glass cup in his hands. He sips at the coffee, enjoys its bitter bite. He’s starting to feel the exhaustion of the past several days. He definitely feels like he got hit by a truck. Dave picks her way back across the table, stopping to crunch down one of the sugar cubes left for Hel and Tony, and she then hops up onto Tony’s shoulder again, likely intending to play with his hair.

Unfortunately, she picks his left shoulder.

Tony hisses, the cup slipping out of his hand to knock and spill atop the table as he curls in on himself, startling Dave away. Hel takes another sip, watching him curiously.

“I suppose this means we ought not to delay in our visit then. I wasn’t aware you were injured as well.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t really important.”

Still, Hel takes him to the infirmary. It’s completely empty and bare, save for the ghost waiting to see to Tony.

“The dead do not often require medical attention,” is what Hel tells him.

Loki isn’t anywhere to be seen, but the ghost tending to Tony explains that the prince is being treated in a private room, mainly to avoid distressing Tony or Hel. Tony doesn’t exactly think there’s a whole lot that could distress Hel, but hey, he could be wrong.

Cold hands help him peel off the majority of his clothes, although he’s allowed to retain his pants and shoes. The vambrace containing JARVIS is set aside, and soon the gruff-looking ghost- Les, he calls himself- is examining Tony’s shoulder intently. No instruments are needed. All he needs to do it phase his hand through the angry, dark purple and red bruising, and he determines Tony’s problem lies in torn ligaments, almost definitely made so severe by his determination to use a limb he really should have let rest instead. Les vanishes and returns with a silver disk, which projects a translucent white bubble around it. The disk is fixed to Tony’s shoulder, and he is ordered to remain still while the ligaments knit themselves back together.

Loki is transferred to one of the many empty beds several hours later. His skin appears more or less whole, but Hel and Tony are both informed that he remains in a fragile state, and that he will be kept unconscious until such time as he can wake up without being in excruciating pain. Tony
turns down Hel’s offer of setting him up in a guest room. Instead, he curls up on the bed beside Loki’s and watches the prince’s chest rise and fall.

Tony is given permission to touch Loki two days later, and to Hel’s surprise, he first asks for a hair straightener.

“He likes it this way,” is all he says in explanation, but Tony receives what he asks for, and he dutifully brushes, straightens, and brushes Loki’s hair again until it splays ruler-straight across his pillow. He sets the two disengaged pads on the small table provided, and strokes his calloused fingers over the back of Loki’s hand.

When Loki is allowed to wake four days later, Tony is asleep. In fact, he stays asleep for a good, long while. Later, Tony might silently accuse Les of keeping him under out of sheer exasperation for Tony’s reluctance to make nice for medical treatment, but at the moment it hardly matters. He drifts towards wakefulness, flinching slightly as he becomes aware of voices.

“He’s doing so well, Father. So vibrant. You could see him, you know,” Hel prods softly, and Tony frowns.

“No,” comes the sharper response. “That would invite pain neither of us needs.”

Feeling horribly like he’s eavesdropping, Tony opens his mouth in an exaggerated yawn, unfurling himself from the twisted position he’s ended up choosing for sleep. This shuts up the two speakers whispering not far from him, and when Tony rolls over and opens his eyes, he’s met with Loki’s green eyes finally focusing on him. The trickster looks entirely bemused, although there’s something painfully pale and gaunt and sickly about him.

“Hey, babe,” Tony rasps, flopping his newly-healed left arm out over the side of his bed. Loki reaches out and traces a line down Tony’s palm in return.

“Yes, hello Tony,” Loki murmurs drily.

The moment draws out, green eyes gazing into brown as their fingers brush together, but neither one of them seems inclined to move.

“Oh by the nine, you truly are revolting,” Hel mutters, rising from her place at the foot of Loki’s bed. “Come find me when you are finished with- whatever it is you’re doing.” She flaps a hand in their general direction as she makes her escape, and Tony grins.

“You could have told me I was harboring your daughter’s spy,” is what he settles on saying, minutes later. Loki huffs an amused laugh.

“And spoil the surprise? I think not.”

There’s an elephant in the room, and they both know it. There’s a very particular reason they’re in the realm of the dead, but there’s a stubborn set to Loki’s jaw that lets Tony know he’d much rather just brush the trauma behind him and pretend he’s fine.

“Can I-?” Tony sits up and slides off his narrow bed, crossing the few steps over to Loki’s. He hovers there, waiting for permission or denial, and Loki shuffles over, making room where there really is none. Tony settles down on his side, facing the prince, and while Loki tenses as Tony wraps his arms around him, he doesn’t deny Tony this either. The inventor brings his prince’s forehead against his own, and they simply rest there together, legs tangled and arms entwined. Loki’s hand settles on Tony’s chest.
You all know I'm not above begging for comments, but especially now, nice comments would be deeply, deeply appreciated. I may have been disowned yesterday. Your friendly neighborhood author is nonbinary, and I very much need to change my name—preferably legally, so I can have the right name printed on my degree when I graduate in a few semesters. I intended to do this in March, but I ended up impulsively coming out to my parents last week. This led to an argument, after which my conservative father told me that he'll transfer my college savings plan to me, and then he doesn't care whether I come home. I'm trying to figure out whether I'm still on his insurance, whether I can still access mental health care, which I need now just as much if not more than ever, how I'll secure transportation, etc. All the while, I'm getting texts from him wishing me good luck, and telling me I'll always have a place in the family.

So while I'd prefer you don't comment on my situation, I'd adore some positive feedback on this work, since I've been pouring my heart and soul into it.

Also, don't look for pictures of acid burns. I did, when deciding what substance to use in place of snake venom, and yeah. If you like looking at awful, painful wounds, go ahead. If you're squeamish, do not.
Tony wakes up again when the infirmary is dark. He feels Loki’s breaths puff against his forehead, warm and soft, and he knows they are safe. Tony closes his eyes again.

Something soft and fluttery lands on his cheek, and Tony flaps a hand up to brush it away. When the inventor settles down again, the fluttering feeling returns. When the cycle is repeated a third time, he carefully sits up without disturbing Loki, irritated and wondering what the hell keeps messing with his face. He freezes, eyes wide, to see the infirmary filled with moths.

They’re pure white, mostly. As he holds his hand out and allows one to alight, it fans its wings, and Tony can see what look to be patches of pigment mimicking the burn of a flame through a sheet of paper on each wing. It takes off again.

Tony looks down at Loki, who seems entirely unperturbed by the insects fluttering around the room. In fact, Loki is still completely and totally asleep.

“Okay…” Tony mutters to himself, slowly rising out of bed.

Loki shifts and grumbles where he’s been left alone, but Tony is fixated on the moths. Now that he’s on his feet, the moths condense and group into a loose group, and like an amorphous flock of starlings, they flow out the infirmary’s open door, with only a few stragglers remaining to nudge Tony into following. How such tiny things can actually nudge is beyond Tony, but he gets the hint. When in hell, follow the moths.

His bare feet make no sound as he follows the moths, and everything is… strange. Tony passes a ghost- a child running through the hall- but her movements are nearly nonexistent, like she’s been caught in amber. Around another corner a crow seems caught in mid-flight, and Tony stares with wide eyes until the moths prompt him to follow again.

He’s led to a door. It’s a fairly simple door, made of dark wood and etched with a mirrored tree, but the walls, ceiling, and floor immediately surrounding it have been scorched black. Tony feels the ash beneath his feet as the cloud of moths nudges the door open. He pauses in the doorway, looking back over his shoulder. Is this a good idea? Uh… probably not. Is he going to do it anyways?

He feels like he must.

Like Alice in Wonderland, Tony falls through the emptiness, but he feels- calm. Calm. That’s the right word.

Tony drifts amongst the moths. He doesn’t know how long he remains suspended in nothingness, but the door has long-since gone, and finally, he finds himself settled on a bed of leaves. Tony realizes, then, that he’s closed his eyes, and when he opens them, he finds the breath sucked out of him.

He seems to be in the crook of two truly mammoth branches, where green leaves have managed to get themselves caught. All around him is space. Not just- not empty space. But nebulae. Stars. Galaxies. It’s like- like having the whole goddamn universe laid out before him, around him. The moths settle onto the tree’s wood and blend in, until Tony is absolutely, undeniably-
There’s something strange about being in a place with no sound but what you make. All Tony’s life he’s been surrounded by the hum of electricity or the sound of traffic far below. The crashing of distant waves or the sound of songbirds. The rustle of the air moving, at least.

Here, there’s nothing.

Nothing but a vaguely-humanoid thing of light settling gently on the wide, wide branch a ways away from him.

The being is pale green, like the color of a new leaf’s underbelly, and it crouches for a moment, it’s angular head tilting to regard Tony with what is undoubtedly curiosity. Tony rubs nervously at his arc reactor, blinking in the face of the being’s bright aura as it approaches. The flat, round stump of one arm splits at the end, forming four long, thin fingers and a thumb-like projection. These fingers curve into the thin nightshirt Tony wears, and he gets the message.

Follow me.

As Tony follows the green being down the road-like branch, he has to stop in his steps again, unable to comprehend the sheer size of the tree before him. The branch he currently stand on is nothing but the tip of one twig, massive though it is. Far, far below and high, high above, there is-

Well.

“What is this?” he asks, but he receives no answer.

Tony walks for what feels like an eternity but surely cannot be nearly that long, because he doesn’t grow tired in the least. Somewhere along the way, one by one, more beings of colored light join his escort, until there are six in all. They disperse again when he comes to what he’s certain is the twisted hollow of the tree’s center. Through the latticework of wood, he can still see the galaxies, but as he walks in deeper, behind layer after layer after layer of shimmering, glowing tapestries hanging from the high, unseen ceiling, even that disappears.

The outer ring of tapestries is perfectly preserved, and the fabric feels like warm silk as Tony brushes past. The countless rings after are whole and beautiful too, but as he progresses farther and farther inwards, they start unraveling. It starts with a single thread, from what he sees, but by the time he reaches the very center, the tapestries are no longer that, but instead resemble tangles of colorful threads, writhing like snakes to find their places again. In the center, bathed in light from a source Tony can’t identify, sits a spinning wheel. He approaches, rubs his fingers over the wheel itself.

“It’s just for show, you know,” someone sighs, and Tony whirls around to be confronted by three figures completely obscured in rubes. They are tall, nearly twice as tall as Tony himself, and the only thing he can see of their bodies, the fingers- those are more like claws than anything. He swallows.

“Oh yeah?” he manages.

“Oh yes.”

Tony can’t figure out which one speaks. He can’t see their faces, and they all remain so very still. It could be just one speaker, or they could all share the same voice. He doesn’t know.

“Where am I?”
“You know where you are, Tony.”

He supposes he does. Loki likes to talk about the World Tree. He didn’t realize this meant an actual tree.

“Why am I here?”

“That’s what everyone wants to know, isn’t it? Why am I here? What am I doing? Where will I go?” The three robed figures drift out from each other, creating a perfect triangle around Tony and the spinning wheel. “Once upon a time, we knew the answer, but never for you, Tony.” One of them lifts a shining thread twined blue and gold, and with a moment of shock, Tony realizes the thread springs directly from his chest. From his heart.

“What is that?”

“You, Tony. This is the thread of your fate.” The figure draws his thread between their hands, and he can imagine a tug in his chest. “And it is a very curious thread indeed. Neither beginning nor ending in the boughs of this tree.”

“I know I’m from the wrong time, but-”

“No,” one of the figures says sharply. “No, you are not from the wrong time. You are from the wrong tree.”

“What are you saying?”

“You know. You know, Tony.” The figure drops his thread. “All the work we put in, all the care we took, reduced to this. Because of you.”

Six clawed hands sweep out in unison to gesture at the tangled threads around them. But strangely, so very strangely- they don’t sound angry. No, they sound- intrigued.

“I’m the confounding variable.”

“Yes. What remains to be seen is whether this is a good or bad thing.”

Tony runs his thumb over the spinning wheel’s needle, careful not to prick himself. He looks up again.

“Why am I here? Why did you bring me here?”

Because who else could have sent the moths, and opened the door?

“We are curious. You are the first new addition to this tree since it first sprouted.” They splay their fingers. “We wished to meet the one laying waste to destiny.”

“I’m not important enough to ‘lay waste’. Especially not to destiny. Isn’t that, you know, predetermined?”

Not that he believes in fate, or destiny. Or at least, he didn’t. But now-

And he’s not. He really isn’t. He’s one man, like Morgan said.

“And yet, all you need to birth a tsunami is one misplaced stone. One unimportant, unimpressive, completely ordinary stone, falling from its perch of eons.”
So here's a personal update for you. I'm still not looking for comments on my situation, but I just suppose I ought not to leave everything off where it was last week. I still have access to medical care, which I've taken advantage of. I attended crisis counseling to handle the fact that I had purchased medicine to overdose on (I didn't actually make an attempt. I ended up calling a friend to come sit with me, and then turned over the medicine to a psychiatric professional). This is the second time in my life I've gotten so close to killing myself, and I am so incredibly grateful for my sister and friends and therapist. I'll take a moment to say hey, if you've got a plan to kill yourself, or you're hurting yourself, or starving yourself, or otherwise harming yourself or are planning to, there are people who care. I've been shocked by how amazing and understanding my professors are, and I've been made aware of support networks at my university and introduced to other transgender individuals.

I'll be moving into an apartment in April, and hopefully after that I'll be able to avoid seeing my dad for as long as possible. In the meantime, you can expect regular updates on this fic, at least. I've already got up to chapter 36 written. I'm just trying to stagger things out.
Tony wakes up again when the infirmary is dark. He feels Loki’s breaths puff against his forehead, warm and soft, and he knows they are safe. Tony closes his eyes again.

He jerks upright, heart pounding in his chest. Loki startles beside him, digging his slender, atrophied fingers into Tony’s hip in surprise.

“What? What is it?” the prince mumbles, blinking sleep out of his green, green eyes.

In the blue light of Tony’s reactor, the infirmary is empty. Tony scrubs a hand across his face and settles back down.

“Nothing. Just- I thought I saw something,” he murmurs. “Go back to sleep.”

Tony feels Loki relax again, bit by bit, but Tony remains alert and wary. The lamps regain their glow some hours later, signifying day, and he slips out of bed, careful not to disturb his companion.

Loki remains out like a light. Les took pity on the second day of Loki’s induced coma, and filled Tony in on the specifics of the prince’s condition. According to the ghost, Eir’s deceased mentor-Hulnra- decided the fastest and most stable way to restore Loki was to draw mass away from other parts of his body, like fat stores and muscle mass, and rebuild what the acid ate away. This has the side effect of leaving Loki exhausted as his body tries to come to terms with the traumatic induced healing process. He needs his sleep.

And Tony has a door to find.

His memory of what may or may not have been a dream is fuzzy and indistinct at best, but he thinks he remembers the way. A wash of cold hits him midway down one hall, and he looks to see a small child- a girl- materialize behind him. She hides a smile behind insubstantial fingers, her hair drifting like one submerged, and blurts out an apology in a language Tony doesn’t understand before returning to her haphazard game of running through Hel’s castle. Around another corner, he startles a crow from its perch, and the bird soars out an open window to the field of mist outside.

When Tony is sure he must be approaching the door, he pauses, frowns. He- he thought it would be here. Instead, there is a stone wall, and a tapestry, just as grey as every other soulless thing in Hel’s domain. It depicts the flow of a river cutting through mountain cliffs, and it feels soft and smooth beneath his fingers. Tony brushes the tapestry to the side, splaying his hand over the solid stone beneath.

“Are you looking for something?”

Tony flinches, drawing his hand close to clutch as his reactor. Hel watches him curiously, a crow perched on her shoulder.

“No, I was just- It’s nothing.” Hel inclines her head, although she sports the exact same expression Loki tends to wear when he doesn’t believe Tony one iota. Tony shakes his head, closing his eyes, and when he looks at the queen again, she’s leaning comfortably against her staff. “Actually, I have a question.”

“I most likely have an answer. It’s amazing what you learn when you tend the souls of the dead.”
“What do you do, here?”

Hel regards him for a moment, before gesturing for Tony to follow.

“Here, come with me. I will show you. On second thought-” Hel purses her lips. “Perhaps you ought to dress, first. My realm can be too cold, for the living.”

Tony isn’t indecent, persay, but she has a point. The thin nightshirt and linen pants hide goosebumps, and his feet are freezing, now that he thinks about it. Standing barefoot on chilled stone might do that, yeah.

Once Tony is fully dressed and pointedly shooed, Hel collects him again. And she actually takes him outside. Through a raised portcullis, and into the cotton-thick fog. Hel pauses, after a few steps, and has Tony take hold of the tassels around her waist.

“Don’t let go,” she warns. “If you lose yourself here, you won’t ever see the living again.”

So Tony wraps the tasseled cord around his hand, and hold on tight as the queen guides him through the fog.

The fog things to a mist, and then to a haze as the indistinct ground takes shape into packed white dirt. On either side, round, domed grey houses form, and Tony can hear the sound of children laughing and elders gossiping, and not-dogs barking and birds singing. He sees the ghosts moments after he hears them, mainly purple-skinned humanoids going about their business like they’re still alive. For the most part, they go about their business without seeming to notice either Tony or Hel, but a very, very few look up and smile, wave their three-fingered hand in greeting before returning to their tasks.

“Helheim proper adapts,” Hel says. “It isn’t sentient. At least, I don’t think so. But it does respond to the souls under my care. Whatever they expect out of the afterlife, they get. The Iliri, for example, believe they will go to a place without sickness, danger, or fear, where they will, for lack of a better word, live until there comes a time for them to be reborn.”

“They reincarnate?”

Hel shakes her head.

“No. Well, somewhat. Not exactly. My duties really begin when Ragnarok comes. Once all life and all realms have been extinguished, my job is to bring the souls to their final resting place, in the newest ring of Yggdrasil. That takes the entirety of the cosmic winter. When spring comes again, and the Norns set out all destinies, a new iteration of every soul in Yggdrasil’s rings is primed to form, while the old iterations sleep. I’ll see to the care of the new souls until my next iteration is born, in which case he, she, or they will guide me to my rest as well, like I did for Hela Loptrdorna.”

Hel guides Tony through a patch of dense mist and away from the Iliri, and when they emerge, familiar wood sits beneath Tony’s feet. The gently pulsing expanse of wood rising before them seems to go on for an eternity to either side, although Tony feels fairly certain it curves around, given that, according to Hel, this constitutes one of the tree’s rings. Natural alcoves mark the wood, of all shapes and sizes. As Tony approaches, he sees a niche containing a sleeping songbird, no bigger than a tangerine, while directly to the upper left, a huge alcove holds a slumbering creature the likes of which Tony has never seen, easily the length of a football field, if not more. He adjusts his grasp on the tassel in his hand. Tony clenches his jaw.
“So you’re saying every soul in existence can be found here.”

“Every soul in the previous existence,” she corrects.

“What happens when a completely new soul shows up?”

“Oh, that doesn’t happen, actually. All souls in existence now are iterations of the very first souls from Yggdrasil’s very first spring. I can’t really access anything farther back than the past cycle’s record, but I have no reason not to believe my past iteration, nor she the one before her.”

There’s something gnawing at Tony, something he needs to know, something he heard once. In a dream.

“Can you show me my past soul?”

Hel smiles playfully.

“Why? Are you having doubts you exist?” she teases, but something in Tony’s expression must clue her in, because the smile falls away. “Oh. You are, aren’t you. Alright, let’s see.”

Tony follows Hel as she paces around the ring, somehow moving up several levels despite the completely-flat surface they walk on. She comes to a starburst singed into the wood and splays her blue hand across. The lines decorating that side of her body glow faintly, and Tony watches, and waits. He doesn’t particularly like waiting.

“Y’know, I’m surprised you’re actually agreeing to this,” Tony informs her, drawing a laugh from the queen.

“As I said, you learn quite a bit when you’re queen of all souls, and there’s a sort of rulebook. Number one on the list is that I may never offer, only answer.” She casts a mischievous glance in his direction. “I’ve been dying for someone to ask me questions.”

“Oh my god, that was awful.”

Hel continues her search for some time, while Tony fidgets and considers the merits of releasing his tether to explore. The queen’s eyes flick over to Tony from time to time, devolving from befuddlement to confusion to outright consternation. By the time Hel lets her hand drop, Tony has his answer.

“There is no other me.”

Hel tugs on her curly black hair, frowning deeply.

“That isn’t possible.”

“It is if I’m not from here. This universe, tree, whatever you want to call it.”

Something in his chest hurts, because if the robed figures were right about his ‘thread’ originating in some other universe, then there’s a chance they’ll be right about it ending elsewhere as well. And that’s- Tony doesn’t have any intention of leaving Loki’s side again, no matter what some weavers tell him. He’ll find a way to stay.

“Don’t tell Loki,” is what Tony says. “He doesn’t- I need to be here, with him and for him, and I think he needs me too. It don’t- He doesn’t need to worry about the possibility of me vanishing on him.”
Tony’s going to be doing enough worrying on his own, thank you very much.

“You ask me to lie to my father.”

“I’m asking you to refer to Rule Number One. If he specifically asks you, hey, is Tony from another universe, then yeah, sure. Do whatever you want. But don’t offer that to him. Please. Let me do it first.”

And Tony truly does intend to tell Loki. He doesn’t lie to Loki. That's not a thing he does. Secret-keeping, maybe, but not of the big things. And this is pretty big. It’s just- Loki doesn't need to be worrying about Tony yet.

Hel remains silent for a long, syrupy moment, but in the end, she inclines her head.

“Very well. For the moment, I will keep your secret.”

Tony is led back to the colorless castle, through the fog and mist until they’re safely ensconced in chilled halls once more. Dave finds her way to Tony, and Tony back to Loki, and everything is fine.

They celebrate Loki’s own birthday in Helheim, eight days later. Loki remains frail and tires easily, but the smile on his face as he sits between his daughter and Tony is the most genuine one Tony’s seen in weeks. Tony, uh. Well. He didn’t exactly know when Loki’s birthday was, so he’s a little- a little empty-handed. But! He fully intends to rectify this error, as soon as he has access to his workshop again.

Word comes several days later, that Asgard is safe for Tony and Loki to return to. A rather startled-looking kestrel- escorted by a murder of crows- brings the news, and Tony doesn’t bother trying to wrap his mind around how the small raptor managed to find them on another fucking planet. In any case, Tony and Loki say their goodbyes- Loki’s rather more heartfelt and reluctant that Tony’s- and with Hel’s aid they walk through thick fog, which spits them out at the mouth of the bifrost. Heimdall welcomes them back, and just like that, they’re ‘home’.

Just as Tony predicted, everything gets swept under the rug. Odin remains in mourning for his brother- though Thor’s black ribbon is no longer anywhere to be found- and the general populace returns to tolerating Loki. Nothing more, nothing less. Loki allows Frigga to hold him tightly, though he flinches at her first approach and finds himself needing to actually give her permission to touch him, and if both mother and son end up with wet eyes, well. No one mentions it.

Loki’s desire to be allowed time alone seems to have been overridden by the fear of having no one to help him when he is alone, so he does nothing to protest when Tony inserts himself into his space on a near daily basis. Tony, for his part, doesn’t pry, doesn’t question, although he makes it clearly known that he’s willing to listen.

‘I’m here,’ is what he tries to say without words. ‘Whether or not I’m needed, I’m here.’

Loki spends more time in the workshop, after they return from Helheim. Whatever explorations and personal endeavours he’d been prone to, before- they seem to go on the back burner. Instead, Loki watches Tony tinker, watches him start hammering and shaping and smoothing out the pieces and components for Mark III-B. Watches as Tony crafts and creates.

Tony receives permission from Elder to bring Loki along to his lessons, once they start back up. Elder still jealously guards his secrets, insisting Loki wait in another part of the cave system while Tony is put through his paces, but he counts it as a win that the dragon is allowing Loki to remain
If Loki can tell Tony’s keeping something from him, he doesn’t give any indication, which suits Tony just fine. He supposes maybe he can let himself be a hypocrite, and brush his new knowledge under the rug as well.

Unnur doesn’t say a word about Loki’s presence, the next time Tony drops by. Even if she hadn’t been one of the many people in the arena, watching Tony fight as Loki’s ‘champion’, word travels fast. She simply eyes Loki critically, then foists a rag and bottle of cleaning solution into his hands.

“The windows need washing,” is what she says, and Loki cracks a smile.

“I suppose I ought to make myself useful then.”

And Tony isn’t the only one who decides their schedule, either. He doesn’t simply drag Loki around wherever he wants to go. Sometimes, Tony is the one trailing along. As the prince regains his strength, he travels, and where before he might have chosen to go alone, now he brings Tony.

So they travel, usually for no more than a week at a time before they return home. This is made much, much more interesting by Tony’s admission regarding the strings.

“How?” is what Loki demands of him. “How do you feel these so-called ‘strings’?”

And oh, how it pisses Loki off. Tony can’t teach Loki how to grab onto the strings, but he can pick one that feels interesting and pull the two of them along. Which is how they end up on a sandy asteroid, with a pod of bioluminescent space orca swimming through the nebula around them, as Loki rants and rails, going on and on and on about how if anyone should break the known laws of magic, it should be him, the chaos god, not Tony Stark the tinkerer.

Tony can do nothing but grin, and offer to let Loki pick the location next time.

When they return from that particular trip, there’s a bouquet waiting for Tony on his workbench. A bouquet of metal flowers. Along with them comes a note.

Tony, it says, written in neat, simple script. *I have been told you hold an interest in living metal. The dwarves guard it jealously, but while they must smelt it, here it is grown. Perhaps this will help you in your endeavors.*

And ooooh, he wants. He hadn’t realized the flowers were actual, honest-to-god metal. It feels like a crying shame to melt them down and craft what he needs, but hey- whatever works, works.

So finally, months after giving Eir an empty promise, he returns to her gentle clutches, once more with Loki at his side. In his hands he holds a padded wooden box, and within that rests the flexible, shiny new casing for his reactor. It’s thin, and light, and finally, finally, it seems like he’ll be able to be rid of the thick, heavy, unforgiving weight on his lungs.

He changes into the thin robe Eir gives him, drinks the draught she prepares for him. It had taken some wheedling and bargaining, but Loki is going to be allowed to stand in for the- the surgery. The surgery to remove all the shrapnel, all the heavy metal supporting the reactor. No one is allowed to touch the reactor except Loki. Not Eir, not her nurses. Tony doesn’t give a fuck that by the time they remove the casing, all the shrapnel will be gone and his life out of constant danger. No one touches it but Loki.

Loki has this look on his face, this insecure sort of awe, like he’s entirely uncertain why Tony is so adamant and rigid in his stance on the reactor being in Loki’s hands only, but Tony can’t find the
Eir places a bubble-mask over his mouth and nose, and Tony counts backwards from ten, and then-

He wakes up. And he can *breathe*.

He doesn’t even have a single bandage on him. No, instead, he has a reinforced sternum (as suggested as practical by Eir), a paper-thin reactor casing, and a warm light in his chest. And a prince, watching him sleep.

There’s no grogginess, which is unexpected. Tony would have expected general anaesthetic, even Asgardian anaesthetic, to leave him feeling fogged-up and dull, but he feels bright, and alert, like he’s just had the best sleep of his life.

He goes through a whole gauntlet of tests to ensure he won’t die from some unseen complication, before he walks out again with a spring in his step, clutching in his hand a small box containing twenty seven small, sharp pieces of metal.

He knows just where to put them.

Chapter End Notes

Another chapter! These two have to be paired :)
A week and a half later, Tony and Loki are back with Elder. The recovery time after most Asgardian surgery seems to be about one day, which is spent sleeping in the infirmary. So Tony is up on his feet and running around within no time.

Thus, Elder.

The last time Loki and Tony saw him, the dragon had let them know that their next lesson would be an extended one, lasting somewhere between two and seven days, depending on conditions. What those conditions are? Uh, Tony didn’t know. Elder wouldn’t say.

Now, though. Now Tony knows.

They stand on one of the moons orbiting the Thuban system’s largest planet, at the mouth of a waterfall pouring down, down, down to the verdant forest down below. The sky is blue above them, but the pitch black stone, veined in what Tony guesses to be magma, of the planet claims the horizon. The bellowing and high whistling, warbling calls of uncounted dragons echo and carry.

Remain close, Elder projects. The planet above us Kra-id, the First Egg. The cradle of dragons. From that stone came the first of my ancestors, and to that stone I will one day return. These moons are our meeting grounds, where we come to socialize, to trade, to seek out a mate, among other things. For a dragon to intrude on another’s territory uninvited is highly offensive, done for one of two reasons: the invader wishes to challenge the territory’s dominant dragon- or dragons, for a mated pair- for their holdings, or a great catastrophe looms, in which case we flock together in defense of our species. This is a common space, belonging to Kra-id themself.

“Is Kra-id an egg, or a dragon?” Loki inquires.

Neither. They are... difficult to describe. You were not born with our ancestral knowledge. Kra-id is our beginning, and our end. That is all you need to know.

Loki seems dissatisfied with the answer, but lets the matter lie. Elder had originally been reluctant to allow Loki to tag along, but had eventually relented. As a prince of Asgard, Elder had said, it might be fitting for him to know how to respect his allies.

They climb up onto one of Elder’s elbow-spines, and hold on tight as he launches himself off the edge of the waterfall, down to a stony clearing in the trees below. The trees, which are easily taller than Stark Tower and thicker around than a freeway, loom all around them. Elder waits patiently for his passengers to disembark, and thus their introduction into dragon culture begins.

When two dragons meet, for instance, the dragon lower on the pecking order bows and greets the more senior one first. You don’t touch another dragon without permission or intent to fight, unless...
you are very young and still being tended to by your dam, in which case all bets are off. When two dragons of equal rank meet, they bow together, and introduce themselves simultaneously, or, if you happen to want to flatter the dragon you’re speaking with, you speak first.

There are so many rules and nuances besides that Tony’s head reels, and he can’t help but be glad he, for one, is not a dragon.

There’s more to dragon culture than rules and respect, though. There are also tragedies.

What Tony originally took to be a mossy outcropping of stone turns out to be a dragon, and this dragon is why Elder has chosen to come to Kra-id’s fourth moon.

A dragon will only take one mate in their lifetime, Elder explains, stopping a respectable distance from the barely-moving dragon. This bond, between two mated dragons- It is an entwining of hearts, a merging of souls. When one dies- He pauses, closing his eyes in a long, slow blink. When one dies, so does the other. Both return to the stone from which we first came. The deeper and older the bond, the more rapidly the surviving mate dies. There are, however, exceptions.

Most dragons do not survive the death of their mate, and those that do seek to rectify their state as soon as possible. However, if our first attempt at joining our mate does not succeed- We must accept that we are not yet meant to die, although we are unwhole. We must continue to live. This is difficult, however. Tony, should you ever witness the breaking of a mating bond, you must approach the surviving half and tell them this: You will always have a place by my side. Whether they are your enemy or a stranger, it does not matter. You must say these words.

Now you both will wait here until I return. If you are approached, bow and speak first. Tell them their Fral claims you.

With a deafening thud of displaced air, Elder takes flight again, leaving Loki and Tony alone in the dragons’ clearing.

“Do you know what a Fral is?” Tony asks.

“The term is familiar, but no, not at the moment.”

No dragon approaches them. Rather, the massive creatures with their glimmering scales and gemstone spines ignore them, choosing instead to lay together and trill at each other, or spar, or- well. The smaller, younger ones do this interesting thing where they line up and seem to compare wings, splaying them up in an unnatural position as they face off. When one such display devolves into fighting, Tony realizes it’s a dominance display, to see who outranks the other. The few fights this results in resolve themselves quickly, but Tony prays he never has to see full-grown dragons fight.

Elder returns carrying the carcass of some leathery animal, and with a flick of his tail, he motions for Tony and Loki to follow.

The immobile dragon is thin and dull-scaled, and yes, that really is moss growing on their hide. Elder emits an inquisitive, high-pitched trilling noise, but the mossy dragon only closes their eyes. The carcass is dropped from Elder’s jaws, and he slits its belly with a gush of blood, revealing the wet meat within.

No dragon will give you their true name. Only their parents and mate will ever have this knowledge, Elder explains as he continues to trill and rumble. Tony realizes, in that moment, that he’s carrying on two conversations at once- one vocal, and one mental. I know this dragon, though.
They use the name Wander, for those who muddle their language with words. Their mate died four years past, and their attempt at following failed. They refuse to care for themself, now, and as clan Fral, I am responsible for those beneath me. Fate demands Wander live, and live Wander shall.

The rule about not touching without permission seems to have been laid to the wayside, as Elder bows his head, nudging Wander’s ridged cheek with his nose. One of Elder’s visible eyes locks onto Tony.

The dragon with silver scales- yes, that one. Go. Request they come aid me.

Trial by fire, huh?

He manages to not offend the silver dragon, and that sets the tone for the rest of the long, long day. Elder sends both Tony and Loki here, there, fetch that, fetch them. The dragons now gathered around Wander carefully groom the limp creature, pulling off damaged scales, burning away moss and lichen and the plants doing their best to take root between scales. It takes a full day and night for Wander to finally accept one mouthful of meat, placed between their teeth by Elder himself. Hours later, one mouthful becomes two, and by the end of the third day, Wander is eating on their own, no longer in the furrow dug out by their body. Once the entirety of the carcass is eaten, bones and offal and all, Wander tries to lay back down, to reclaim their spot in the rock, but Elder pushes them bodily away, rumbling in his chest. With a mixture of brute force and gentle coaxing, he herds Wander out of the clearing and through the forest, to a lake of milky white. Tony and Loki, who hitched a ride on Elder’s elbow-spine, hop down, but Elder blocks them.

Do not touch the lake, he warns. It is an arsenic solution. Wonderful for dragon scales, terrible for softer skin.

Message received.

Elder slips into the arsenic lake with Wander. The dragons swim. They swim for so long, in fact, that Tony and Loki fall into an exhausted sleep in the cradle of the trees’ roots. Which is- come on. It’s understandable. The’ve been here for three- going on four days now, with only naps in the rocky clearing to keep them going. And those days aren’t even normal days. According to Asgard-time, they’ve been here six days.

Elder rouses them some time later, to take them back to his cave so Heimdall can access them, to take them home, because according to the dragon, the Thuban star system is inaccessible by normal teleportation, even in regards to the Bifrost. No, Kra’id and its moons are only accessible by what Elder calls gateways- temporary, somehow-stable rips in the fabric of space. They amount to induced, controlled wormholes. According to Elder, there comes a point when an object’s mass becomes too large and too energetically-expensive to teleport. At that point, a gateway is a more stable mode of transport. These gateways tend to be rather unimpressive to look at, unless, of course, you open one large enough to transport, say… an entire dragonclan. Loki listens with eyes as wide as saucers.

“I have heard tell of such a sight only once,” he exclaims, prompting an amused huff from Elder. “When Bor led Asgard’s armies to save the realms from Svartalfheim. The dragons came to his aid. They say the sky split as though wounded, and from this breach came the might of hundreds.”

Elder cocks his head, chewing over his words carefully, before he decides to speak.

I must return to Wander now. I know not when they will sustain themself. I fear we must place a hold on further lessons until they improve. Take this.
Elder fishes out a little metal disk as large in diameter as an apple from his sea of gold, passing it off onto Tony.

“I guess this must be why you didn’t take a mate, huh?” Tony ventures, accepting the disk. “Too dangerous?”

You would be wrong in that assumption, Elder rumbles after a long, long minute. Tony looks at him sharply. My Nova died in the war on Svartalfheim. To live without them - Elder makes a crackling sound. This is one reason I am called to handle dragons like Wander, though our cases are extremely rare. I know that which should not be known.

Keep this on your person. I will contact you when I am able to resume. Until then, take care of each other.

Chapter End Notes

Comments sustain me; let me hear your voices!
Thirty Four

Chapter Notes

Secrets secrets are no fun...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The lessons resume four months later, by which time, Tony has constructed a ring.

It’s simple and sturdy, a speckled band composed of the same material as Tony’s suit. The nifty part is that when commanded by either of two very specific people, it transforms into a wicked dagger. Dotting the spine of the dagger on either side are twenty seven pieces of shrapnel, merged seamlessly with the dagger itself.

It isn’t a wedding ring. Or an engagement ring, for that matter. It isn’t. It’s simply- another way for Loki to protect himself.

“I’m not asking you to marry me,” Tony warns, before presenting his prince with the culmination of three months’ effort, and arguably the second-most complicated collection of enchantments and spells Tony has done to date. Loki regards the ring with curiosity, one brow arched elegantly.

“Which form will it fit?” she asks, sitting up. She is covered by a soft, modest nightshirt as the sheets pool around her hips.

“Both, if everything works the way it should. It should adjust to fit, within a certain size range.”

Intrigued, Loki presents Tony with her right hand, and the inventor rolls his eyes as he slides the mottled gold, silver-spotted ring onto her index finger. She examines the workmanship in the lamplight, watching the sunset glint off the metal as she holds her hand out to catch the rays streaming in through the window.

“It is very pretty,” she praises. Tony grins.

“That’s not all.”

He shows her how to activate the main enchantment, producing the eight-inch blade. The moulded hilt fits perfectly in her palm, and she reflexively closes her fingers around it. Her eyebrows nearly disappear up into her hairline when she takes note of the repurposed shrapnel.

“Is this-?”

“Yeah. Um.” He coughs, suddenly feeling very, very self-conscious. He had a plan. He had a speech. He had his three little words, but he can’t seem to force them out. He wings it. “It’s about as close as I can get to actually physically giving you my heart.”

Loki looks up at him from the dagger, her eyes wet and bright. A gesture, and the ring returns around her finger. Without much else in warning, Tony finds himself with an armful of shapeshifter, as Loki engulfs him in a hug. He holds her close as she buries her face against his hair, her nails digging into his skin as she clutches at him.
“I love you so very much, Tony,” she whispers, and Tony’s heart does a little flip-flop. He’s so hopelessly gone for this person, so much more invested in a relationship than he thinks he’s ever been. He hadn’t been kidding in the least when he’d said there wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do for Loki, those months ago.

The ring never leaves Loki’s finger after that. As a man or a woman, Loki wears his ring, and more than once, Tony catches Loki slashing at invisible enemies, just to test the weight of her ever-present line of defense. It never fails to make him smile.

Frigga notices, because of course she does. Loki holds still long enough for his mother to examine the adornment, which makes Tony go red, because really, he didn’t mean to make such a- such a fuss.

Their relationship seems to be repairing itself, again. Loki doesn’t shy away from her touches anymore, doesn’t duck out of her hugs, and he seems to genuinely welcome them again, rather than simply tolerating them. Odin- no one talks about it, but the king isn’t- he’s not doing too great. When Tony sees him, from time to time, the one-eyed monarch seems- how does he say this. Odin seems dazed. Distracted. He seems- Tony knows better of course, because why the hell would he still be on the throne if it was the case? But while Tony knows better, Odin definitely seems- like he isn’t fully aware of things. Maybe it was Baldur’s death. Maybe he’s approaching what Loki calls ‘Odinsleep’. He just seems… not all there.

But Tony doesn’t pay much attention to Odin, except to avoid him and his ravens. The ravens, he gathers, aren’t inherently bad, the way Odin seems to be inherently a dick. They’re just- they come with the title of Asgard’s Monarch. Tony doesn’t know how old the fucking birds are, but apparently they at least predate Odin. Whatever the case, they hang out in the throne room more and more now, looking droopy and tired. Maybe they’re like phoenixes, and reincarnate. Tony doesn’t know.

Elder contacts Tony one cloudy morning, as Loki shows Tony his conceptual designs for a new helmet- the one with the goddamn horns. Tony bargains and pleads and offers sexual services to convince Loki to tone down the size of the horns, and finally, they reach an agreement. Tony will be the one to forge Loki’s new helmet, so he could technically ‘forget’ to add the horns at all, but he’s not going to do that.

The golden communicator disk trills at him from across the room of the workshop, startling him from where Loki has firmly deposited himself in Tony’s lap, and, unwilling to actually get up and move, Tony holds out a hand, and the disk comes zooming across the room with a pull of magic. He closes his fingers around the disk as Loki mouths at Tony’s neck.

“Stop that,” he gripes. “You’re being a pest.”

“I’m being a distraction, Tony,” Loki purrs. “There’s a difference.”

The prince returns to his self-appointed task, scraping his teeth across the marked expanse of Tony’s neck, and the inventor prays to anyone listening that the disk doesn’t offer a two-way view, because Loki is heavy, and he doubts he could push the trickster out of his lap even if he really wanted to.

Thankfully, his prayers are answered, and all Tony receives is a recorded message, letting him know he’s expected back in Elder’s lair in two days’ time, and that Loki is welcome to join, though he will be made to wait in the underground meadow area, for the duration of this particular lesson. Loki doesn’t seem particularly thrilled about that, but in two days, Elder shows Loki to the meadow and lake lit by glowing crystals high above, while he takes Tony back to the ocean of
Elder curls up, burrowing halfway underneath the treasure in a series of motions that never fail to stun Tony. The dragon rests his chin on his foreclaws, fixing Tony in two crystal violet eyes.

*Today I shall teach you a passive aspect of magic,* the dragon projects in way of greeting. *I believe it relevant, given the company you keep.*

Tony tilts his head, fidgeting with his fingers. He has to admit, he’s just a little disappointed. He likes learning the practical applications, but Elder isn’t the type of being who is swayed easily.

“Alright, shoot. I’m all ears.”

*Do not interrupt me.* Elder huffs out a breath of smoke, and Tony backs down. *Magic is a reactive force. It is not simply a tool to be used; when a being reaches out to the blood of Yggdrasil, Yggdrasil reaches back. In beings like dragonkind, this magic permeates us in all ways. Beings like the Aesir have forgotten their roots in magic, but they remain tied closely enough to this reactive force that certain rules still apply, as evidenced by your Loki.*

Tony furrows his brow, frowning.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Elder rocks his head to the side, exposing the underside of his chin.

*The adoption of one being into a race of such magically-steeped beings as the dragons, or the Aesir, or the Vanir, for that matter, is a complete and total thing. While the child does not lose their first form, they are able to completely take on the form of their adopted race, when outside factors do not interfere. It is not an illusion, but a true changing on form.*

“What the hell does that have to do with Loki? He’s not adopted.”

Abruptly, Elder rolls over again, and he studies Tony critically, before huffing a gusty sigh.

*I forget, often, that you do not have all the senses of the dragons. Your Loki is adopted. A Vanir and an Aes could never produce a Jotun, Tony Stark. Therefore, your Loki is adopted.*

And that- what? What? Back up.

“Loki is adopted.”

*Naturally. I believe, last I heard, that this is a state of affairs concealed from him. Hence his seclusion for today’s lesson.*

Tony sits down with the clinking of coins and jewels. It isn’t a soft landing by any means, but damn Elder, now Tony’s in a weird position.

“Why do you think it’s your place to tell me that, huh?”

Elder rolls all four eyes.

*Because I believe such an example will help you understand today’s lesson, and adoption is a necessary thing to understand, just as it is necessary for you to understand the proper response to witnessing the breaking of a mating bond, and as it is necessary for you to understand the social structure of dragon hierarchies. You must know these things, Tony, if you wish to continue our association.*
Tony’s still trying to wrap his mind around the whole ‘Loki is adopted, and was born the creature he hates most’ thing. That’s- it’s a ticking time bomb. Elder tries to continue speaking, but Tony, for the first time, cuts him off completely, much to Elder’s dissatisfaction.

“I’m really, truly sorry, but I need to go, Elder. I need- I think I need to talk to Frigga.”

Because she would know what to say, how to answer the questions running through Tony’s head. Such as ‘what the fuck’. So the lesson is cut short, with the only thing Tony really learned being that Loki is a Jotun.

Tony presses a distracted kiss to Loki’s forehead when they return to Asgard, before making up some bullshit excuse and running, searching for Frigga. He finds her engaged in conversation with Eir in the infirmary, and the queen breaks off her exchange upon seeing Tony so disheveled. Eir lets them take her private office to chat.

Tony wants nothing more than to pull the bandaid off quickly, to tell Loki what he now knows and help the prince come to terms with his heritage, to handle the fallout before extenuating circumstances make the choice for them, but first, he wants to hear from Frigga, to know what her side of the story is, before he makes any sort of unchangeable decision.

“Is Loki adopted?” he blurts, when the door locks. Frigga’s eyes are wide and startled, but her mouth thins out.

“Where did you hear this?”

“Elder, the dragon I take lessons from. He says that Loki isn’t Aesir, or Vanir, or a hybrid. He says Loki’s a Jotun.”

Frigga lets out a long sigh, tucking a lock of curly copper hair behind her ear.

“A frost giant, to be specific,” she allows, her eyes closed. “Yes, Loki is adopted. Odin told me he found him alone on the ice during the last battle in Asgard’s war against Jotunheim. He brought the child home, and Loki adopted the skin of an Aes without an illusion needing to be cast. We thought- I thought it best. So long as no one knows him to be a Jotun, no one will question his presence here, and he will not face the hatred I fear for him.”

Tony’s throat works as he swallows.

“Thank you. For telling me,” he tells her. Frigga smiles wanly.

“I do not enjoy lying.”

“So why don’t you tell him? Why draw it out.”

Frigga shakes her head, curly bouncing fiercely.

“No. He must not know, Tony. Terrible things will- When he learns of his heritage, I will lose him. I will lose him.”

There’s something in the way Frigga talks about losing Loki that lets Tony know she doesn’t just mean emotionally, but he- Fuck. He doesn’t want to lie to Loki either.

“How about this,” he offers slowly. “I’m not going to lie to him. If he asks me, or if not knowing is going to cause him some sort of pain, I’m going to tell him. Otherwise, I’ll follow your lead. I will. I promise.”
Frigga doesn’t respond, but after a long while, confusion registers on her face.

“He?” Frigga finally asks after that long beat of silence.

“What?”

“You refer to Elder as ‘he’.”

“Yeah, he. Why?”

“Nothing. I simply was given to think the dragons preferred neutrality.”

“Oh. Huh.” To be perfectly honest, Tony had just assumed, and Elder hadn’t corrected him. He grimaces. He supposes if Elder were offended, the dragon would have no qualms letting Tony know. Bad form, he knows, but- Yeah, he’s kind of a coward. He scratches at his jaw, cocking his head, before looking up at Frigga through his eyelashes, his expression wary.

“Does Odin seem alright, to you?”

Frigga folds her hands in front of her, lifting her chin.

“Your concern is appreciated, Tony. I have been discussing his condition with Eir, but at the moment, he appears fully capable of fulfilling his duties.” She tugs the lock of hair back out from behind her ear. “If he- worsens, or it can be proven that his mind-state endangers Asgard, the Council of Nobles can vote to depose him. Such a thing is a drastic measure, though- done when there is no other option.”

Her voice is tight and regal, rather than the affectionate, warm tone she always uses with Tony. She’s stressed, he realizes. Consigned to the role of trophy-wife while her husband cavorts with a mistress and grows increasingly erratic.

If Tony could do something, he would, but his concern for the moment remains with Loki.

Odin does worsen in the months that follow, though obviously not enough to convene this Council of Nobles. Mercel sticks to him like glue. Every time Odin grows confused or disoriented, she points him in the right direction again, whispering in his ear and grounding him with her exploratory fingers. And Odin-

It’s kind of a shock, but Odin places Mercel in line to the throne.

There is very serious talk of the Council convening, but in the end, nothing is done. Mercel is fourth in line, behind Odin’s sons and Frigga herself. There is no danger, they decide, of allowing the state of affairs to remain.

Loki is pissed, and understandably so. Frigga is just as irritated, though she contains it better.

And all the while, Tony keeps his secret. The state of affairs would almost certainly continue along the same vein if Tony and Loki had not been called back from their escapist travels, months later, to witness the coronation of Thor.

Chapter End Notes
Since 33 was so short, I've decided to go ahead and post 34 as well. Enjoy!
The news is brought to them by one of Frigga’s kestrels.

Loki and Tony sit together as Loki converses animatedly with a reptilian sort of person. Tony is only half-following the conversation—something about the intrinsic magical properties of silt from this certain river. He definitely notices, however, when the tiny raptor shows up bearing a nearly-weightless scroll tucked into his carrier harness. The conversation breaks off as Loki leans over to read along with Tony, when the inventor unravels the paper.

“Thor is to be crowned,” Loki states flatly, his face unreadable.

“Yeah, I can see that.”

Nanash, the reptile-person, is handling the kestrel with awe in their eyes, and the send away for scraps of meat, which the kestrel scarfs down as each tiny piece is provided with little ripping sounds. There aren’t any birds on this planet, only reptiles and fish and amphibians and these scaled insect-type-things, so feathers and hair are novelties.

Loki rolls up elegantly to his feet, and offers a hand to aid Tony in standing as well. Tony accepts the help—he’s not as young as he once was, although neither one of them wants to mention it. Compared to Tony, Loki’s fucking immortal, and with Odin hating Tony’s guts, and Idunn’s literal life tied to her care of the orchard? Yeah, there doesn’t seem to be much of anything they can do to rectify the situation.

“Thor is not ready to rule,” Loki murmurs, taking the paper from Tony. His hand smooths back over his hair, fixing it into place again. The breezes of this region aren’t fierce, but they’re persistent, even against the slicked-back style Loki has taken to wearing. Tony’s been letting his own hair grow out just a little, and he’s regretting his decision as strands continue to find their way into his eyes.

“So why would Odin push for a coronation now?”

“Perhaps he has deteriorated further since last we saw him. Perhaps he simply wishes to abscond with Merceil to the countryside. Who knows how his mind works.”

Tony accepts the kestrel on his vambrace, when Nanash returns the bird.

“Are we going to attend?”

There’s a determined set to Loki’s thin lips.
“We must.”

They take a rather leisurely route back, pulled along by Tony’s strings. After all, the coronation isn’t for another month, and if they arrive late for all the fittings and etiquette and all that wonderful jazz, then that’s a few days less of jumping through hoops - mostly on Loki’s part. Tony isn’t royalty, or nobility, or even liked by the king. He’s allowed to be a spectator, nothing more.

He doesn’t see Loki as much as he’s grown used to, in the days leading up to the coronation. Of course Loki comes by the workshop to have a final fitting done on the armor pieces Tony’s been putting together, and the trickster spoons up against Tony’s back at night, but otherwise, Tony finds himself at loose ends.

He hangs out with Unnur for the most part, watches her direct her underlings. The forge is spotless, between the clean-burning fuel and her attention to detail. There’s a little crib set up in her office, where Astrid’s twin boys sleep and rock while their mother is busy, and one of the new guys keeps making doe-eyes at Rolf. Tony can’t help but enjoy the atmosphere.

She’s won, apparently. She sits Tony down over a plate of honey cakes and recounts the story of her father coming to publicly disown her. Unnur’s eyes are bright and satisfied.

“This way, he has no say in the choices I make, and I have no duties to him,” she asserts with unbridled delight. “He thought he was taking something from me, but I had no need or want of it in the first place. My home is here.”

And she has geese, too. Not Idunn’s messenger ducks, but still, geese from Idunn’s pond. Tony nearly falls flat on his ass laughing when Unnur flushes and tells him the geese have been present to chase away cats ever since her girlfriend learned of her allergy.

“They’re such complete bastards,” she moans. “But they keep the cats away, and they make Idunn happy, so I can’t even do anything about them.”

At least the geese are house-trained. How you house-train geese, Tony doesn’t know, but the black-footed creatures waddle outside to the little stretch of grass Unnur has access to to do their business. They still nip and hiss if they’re mad, which seems to be all the time, but they don’t harass the clients, and Unnur and her workers and apprentices know how to handle the pair.

Unnur takes hold of Tony two days before the coronation and eagerly makes him promise to bring her the details. He’ll be allowed in as Frigga’s guest, but Unnur, like most of Asgard’s citizens, doesn’t rank high enough to witness the event. Tony swallows the lump in his throat and promises.

The day of the coronation, Loki departs from bed without a word, which is a little unsettling. Usually there’s at least a ‘good morning, Tony’ thrown in there, but he’s silent. He doesn’t leave the room, simply does his magic trick to dress himself, and in a wave of green light, his full dress armor appears on his body, right down to the helmet - which bears only horns a full seven inches in curved length, rather than the whole foot and a half Loki had originally wanted. Tony props himself up, watching the prince with worried eyes, and Loki meets his gaze. The prince strides over and cups Tony’s face, the ring on his index finger pressing cool and smooth against his cheek. Loki kisses him, soft and sweet, and then says to him, with quiet urgency:

“When the einherjar are called, remain where you are. Do not attempt to play hero.”

Which is - should he tell someone about this? He opens his mouth to question Loki further, but his lover shushes him.
“Trust me. Please.”

So Tony trusts Loki, and the coronation commences. Tony is in his finest clothing, standing amongst the guests, and he watches as Thor struts down the length of the throne room to the cheering of the audience gathered, before coming to kneel before Odin. He first receives a new hammer, Mjolnir- one of the treasures received as a result of Loki’s gamble with the dwarves- and then next, as Odin continues with his speech, as a ceremonial crown is raised, and offered. Frigga and Loki are stationed on the steps of the throne’s dais, and Mercel stands directly beside the throne itself. Thor’s four closest friends, the Warriors Tree and Sif, are also situated on the steps of the dais. Tony stands out in a flash of red leather and gold trimmings amongst a sea of brown- and silver-clad guests.

Before the crown comes to rest on Thor’s head, though, Odin freezes, his face contorting in rage. Abruptly, he turns, leaving Thor kneeling there, uncertain.

“Asgard’s vaults have been invaded,” the king booms, setting the crown down on his throne. “Guards! Defend our home!”

By the time all the chaos dies down, there are twelve dead frost giants, and an uncrowned Thor. Any mention of redoing the coronation is put on hold, until it can be discovered how, exactly, the giants found their way into Asgard. Odin remains in power.

Thor, naturally, takes this personally. He’s been denied the war of vengeance he wants to start- Odin at least seems to be thinking clearly enough to see how that would be a bad idea- but still the prince fumes.

There is talk of retaliation, as Thor sulks with his companions, Loki, and Tony. Loki helpfully reminds his brother that Odin forbade a retaliatory attack. And then Thor brings up the possibility of intelligence, of spying, of finding answers.

A heavy stone settles in Tony’s gut. This isn’t going to end well.

“No. You are not coming with us,” Loki hisses where he’s pushed Tony up against a pillar. Tony clenches his jaw.

“Why? Nothing good ever comes of us being separated. I’m coming with you.”

“Jotunheim is far too cold for your mortal body to withstand, Tony. And you will not accompany us without your armor in any case.” Loki leans in close, his short hair slicked back. “I know you require upwards of an hour to don your armor. We leave immediately. You are not coming.”

Mark III B is almost done, but not quite. If it were finished, Tony could be suited up in five minutes, but even then, he wouldn’t be planning on roaring off to Jotunheim in his suit. Tony brushes Loki’s hands off his shoulders, eyes steely.

“I’ve been there before, Lokes. Elder sent me to learn a special brand of magic, okay? I already have clothes to keep me warm.”

“What in the nine would those beasts have to teach you? They are monsters,” he snarls. “Nothing more.”

“They’re people, Loki. You’d like them- I know you would. They break all the Asgardian rules of magic. Convince Thor to stay here. I’ll take you myself. Please. Please, Loki.”

Loki offers up a wan smile and presses a kiss to Tony’s forehead, before stepping back.
“You will remain here. I will council Thor to remain peaceful, and we will discuss your opinions when I return.”

The prince vanishes in a crackle of green, and Tony swears, as his attempt to pull on the spacial-strings is blocked. The damn kiss. Loki knows how to block Tony’s magic temporarily, but for whatever reason he needs physical contact to lay down the block. It’ll dissolve itself before long, but for the moment Tony is left to pelt down the hallways, sprinting towards the Bifrost, where he knows Thor and his friends were heading before Tony and Loki had their little chat. Without the weight of the reactor’s original unforgiving casing, Tony can run farther and faster, but he still fails to arrive in time to protest. Heimdall informs Tony that the princes and Thor’s friends have already left, and Tony is left trying to figure out what to do. He looks up at the looming Watcher.

“We need to tell Odin. The king doesn’t know about this.”

Tony hates the thought of bringing Odin into this, but Frigga has been effectively deposed, relegated to trophy wife, and they need a way to bring the princes back before either of them fucks shit up.

“I have already sent a message,” Heimdall rumbles to Tony, and the human pats the other man on the shoulder as he passes by in his pacing.

“Good. Fantastic.” He rubs at the reactor through his formal tunic. “I’m going to grab my cold-weather things and go knock some sense into Loki.”

Not that he would ever actually lay a hand on Loki to hurt him, but this secret self-assigned ‘mission’ Thor and Loki are on needs to stop before it gets out of hand.

Things happen quickly, though, and Tony doesn’t get a chance to follow. Odin retrieves his wayward sons, and Thor is banished to Earth. Loki vanishes, and Odin follows, and within hours, Loki is king while Odin sleeps in what appears to be some sort of periodic coma.

Frigga subtly asks Tony to mediate the coming conversation, because somehow- and Tony doesn’t know the exact circumstance surrounding Loki’s learning- Loki now knows he isn’t- he isn’t what he was told he was. The prince is taking it a little better than Tony had thought he would, but still, Loki shies away from Tony’s touch, keeps his distance as though afraid of his own hands.

“Why were you not honest with me?” Loki asks, so softly as he stares down at his father. Mercel is nowhere to be seen, having made herself scarce once Odin was placed in his special sleeping-tube-thing. The queen looks pale and drawn, like she might be sick. Tony never really placed her as one susceptible to nerves, but a fine sheen of sweat clings to her forehead.

“We kept the truth from you so that you would never feel different.” Frigga reaches out to place an unsteady hand on Loki’s shoulder, but the prince steps away, pacing along Odin’s sleeping form to put distance between them. Tony remains off to the side, unwilling to intrude, and yet asked to remain present. Frigga’s hand falls. “You are in every way my son, Loki, and we in every way your family. You must know that.”

She sounds desperate. Silence draws long and thin between them, and Tony decides that yeah, maybe now he should intrude.

“How long will he stay like that?” Tony pipes up, drawing closer by a hair. Loki’s fists clench, and he won’t meet Tony’s eyes. Frigga closes her eyes for a long moment, wavering, and Tony gravitates towards her. She doesn’t look good.
The queen opens her eyes again and says, “I don’t know. This time is different. We were… unprepared.”

“I never get used to seeing him like this,” Loki muses, hands now clasped behind his back. “The most powerful being in the Nine Realms lying helpless until his body is restored. Or his mind.”

“But he’s put it off for so long now, I fear…”

Loki’s eyes snap to his mom as she flinches from nothing, the moisture on her brow beading up. There is unvoiced concern in his face.

Armored steps call their attention to the doorway, and Frigga straightens her spine, collecting herself as best she can. Seven guards enter the room, and one comes closer.

“My queen,” the approaching guard murmurs, coming to kneel before Frigga. In his hands he offers up a long, golden spear. Loki’s eyes widen as Frigga takes the spear and turns to him. It’s the very same one that Tony’s seen in Odin’s hands on countless occasions.

“What-” Loki begins, but Frigga cuts him off, her voice thin and urgent.

“Thor is banished, and Odin sleeps. The line of succession falls to you. Until he awakens, Asgard is yours.”

The prince remains frozen, as the einherjar kneel.

“Mother, I don’t-”

“Take it,” she hisses, and Loki, startled, does so.

Almost immediately, Frigga will fail her. Her legs give out, and it’s only Tony’s impulse reaction that stops her from tumbling to the ground. Tony catches the queen amidst startled exclamations, and he gently lowers her down even as she twists in his arms and dry-heaves, then vomits a good half-cup of black blood. Loki falls to his knees beside her, roaring at the einherjar to fetch Eir.

“It smells of cherries,” he mutters frantically, helping Tony keep her still. “Poison. Arbenide. No, Mother, please!”

Eir arrives in a flurry of motions, nurses bolting after her, and they immediately take their places around Frigga while Tony and Loki are pulled back. The golden spear remains loosely in Loki’s hand as he stares without comprehension at the mass of people struggling to stabilize his mother. The prince flinches again, when Tony nudges against his side.

Later, when Frigga rests fitfully in the infirmary, Eir confirms what Loki already knew: the queen was poisoned, using a substance derived from a roadside weed. Untraceable, given its common nature.

The prince remains by his mother’s side until duties call him away. After all- he’s not really a prince. Loki is king now, like it or not. Mercel reappears. She pretty much sets up camp by Odin’s comatose form- by all appearances the dedicated mistress. Loki doesn’t much care to waste his time or energy barring her from her vigil. Instead, he orders Heimdall to keep an eye on Thor, to ensure he remains safe and out of trouble in the little adobe village he landed in, somewhere in what Tony recognizes as the Southwest US, albeit before Europeans found it and fucked everything up. Otherwise, Loki stays hands-off. As he tells Thor’s friends, a day later:

“My first command cannot be to undo the Allfather’s last.”
There are protests, but Loki continues walking, in what Tony recognizes as a bid to baffle eavesdroppers. The Warriors Three and Sif trail along behind them.

“Why? You are king, and beyond that, Thor is your brother. Surely this counts for something,” Sif demands.

Loki’s staff thuds against the floor on every other step.

“There is a viper in there with my father who would depose me in an instant if she could,” Loki reminds her. “Did you know that Odin placed her in line to the throne? If she sees any fault in me, she can bring up a challenge that holds weight, and then where will Thor be? I am hardly beloved by Asgard, but with Thor now disowned, Odin sleeping, and mother- mother unwell, I am all that stands between Mercel and regency. I need your silence.”

Loki doesn’t get their silence, though, instead, he gets them going behind his back and appealing to Heimdall. Instead, they go down to Midgard, chasing after Thor. Loki lets them go, though he rants and rails in the privacy of his room while Tony does his best to soothe his stressed companion.

Loki twists the ring around his finger, rather than picking at his palms. It wasn’t one of the intended uses Tony had in mind when crafting the little bauble, but it works.

Tony peels away the ceremonial garb weighing Loki down and shoves him into the shower. He forces Loki to stay put, to let the hot water soak into his bones, until he calms down. It takes- it takes a little longer than ideal, but once the king emerges from the steamy bathroom, Tony decides they need to have a talk. Loki has so much on his shoulders at the moment. There are definitely some things he shouldn’t have to worry about.

“I know,” Tony says without preamble as Loki dresses.

The other pauses where he’s pulling on leggings, and straightens, an unreadable look on his face.

“Do you now,” Loki replies flatly. “What exactly is it that you know, Tony?”

Testing the waters. Loki wants to know what sort of damage control he needs to do. Tony wants to prove no damage control is needed. Loki’s fingers curl into the fabric of an undershirt, but he makes no move to pull the article on.

“I know you’re a Jotun,” Tony finishes. He doesn’t give Loki a chance to weigh in, instead steamrolling along. “And I’ve known for a while. And your mom knew. And- I know you’ve got your weird cultural hangups about Jotuns, but whatever you’re thinking- Don’t bullshit me. I know that look. Whatever you’re thinking, it isn’t true. You’re my Loki. You aren’t a monster.”

Something snaps between them, and in an instant, color bleeds across Loki’s skin as his eyes run scarlet, and those nimble fingers wrap around Tony’s throat, hoisting him up from where he’s seated on the bed. Tony’s toes nearly leave the ground, and he splutters, grasping at Loki’s wrist.

“Oh really?” Loki hisses, his touch achingly cold. “This does not seem monstrous to you?”

“N-no,” Tony manages to rasp. “I mean, choking was never my kink, so I’m not- ach- not sure if this is okay, but you- not a monster.”

The trailing words come out as a squeak as Loki’s hold tightens, but all at once, Loki releases him, and Tony stumbles back to brace against the bed. He coughs and gulps in air as Loki stalks away, pacing the length of the room like a penned-up panther.

“They lied to me,” he murmurs, flexing his fingers. “She lied.”
That’s a conversation Loki is going to need to have with Frigga once she’s feeling better, because Tony can’t and won’t make excuses on her behalf. He’s sure she has her reasons, but it isn’t Tony’s job to explain.

“I suppose it explains my station,” Loki adds bitterly, running a hand through his hair. “Always in Thor’s shadow. Always second. Always last. Never enough,” he spits. “I am a beast. How could I have been enough?”

“Babe, stop,” Tony says softly. He gets up, crosses the room. Loki ducks away from Tony’s outstretched hand, and Tony doesn’t press. “There’s no reason for you to have been treated the way you were. Odin didn’t have any excuse.” Loki opens his mouth to make what is no doubt yet another assertion about being a ‘monster’, but Tony heads him off at the pass. “People call your kids monsters, but you love them and see value in them because they deserve love and respect. Why should you be any different? Why should you deserve less? You deserve it, Loki. I swear you do. Have I ever lied to you?”

Loki looks down, and this time when Tony reaches for his face, he remains still enough that Tony can press his palm to Loki’s sharp cheek.

“No,” the trickster mumbles.

“Right. I don’t lie to you, sweetheart. Why would I start now?”

Loki doesn’t cry, but it seems to be a near thing. He closes his scarlet eyes and leans into Tony’s touch, lets Tony crowd up close into Loki’s personal space for a hug.

“You are so very warm, like this,” Loki observes, his voice raw and cracked. The open display of trust, even in the face of what Loki deems to be his monstrous side, definitely affects the trickster. Tony tightens his hold around Loki’s torso, tracing his thumb under Loki’s lip.

“And you’re not as cold as I thought,” Tony counters. “When I was on Jotunheim, no one could touch my bare skin without the risk of giving me frostbite. I wonder if it’s an environmental thing. I think birds—birds can drop their body temperatures by like, 30 degrees celsius when it’s cold out. Can you do that? Imagine how fucking awesome the sex would be!”

This startles a laugh out of Loki, and his red eyes shimmer back to green, the blue leeching away to leave him pale one again.

“For a moment there, I saw the scientist in you,” Loki comments dryly. “And then your mind went straight back to the gutter. Typical.”

The insult is thin and weak compared to some of their usual barbs, but progress. Progress.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Tony rambles on, leaning up to steal a quick kiss. “You’re sexy as hell-fuck. No. Can’t say that anymore. Damnit.” Actually meeting Loki’s daughter, actually named ‘Hel’, had kind of put a damper on that phrase for Tony. “You’re sexy, babe. But, uh. Just between us? I like the blue.”

“So this is to be a fetish?”

Loki covers it well, but Tony can hear the hurt behind his words, and he winces at his own choice of phrase.

“No. It’s not the blue part. It’s you. I like you. However you are, whatever you look like, whatever you do. I- it’s you.”
A kestrel is about the size of a statistically-average adult's hand. They're itsy bitsy and not at all suited for carrying around messages, but this is all fantasy, so I can have messenger kestrels if I want.
I cannot tell you how stressed I am right now. Oh my god, finals suck. I have four finals and four papers due in the next week and a half, and I broke down in tears in my sign language class yesterday. Ooof. Rough. But summer approaches! There is light at the end of this tunnel!

Anyways, you're getting this a half a week early because I might forget to post next week, and I thought it'd be nice to move things along.

Loki isn’t exactly 100% okay with his heritage, but he stops avoiding Tony’s touch. Meanwhile, Eir fusses over the bruising around Tony’s neck while Loki watches, eyes full of guilt as he holds his mother’s limp hand. The healer waves a light-disk over the bruising, and the fingerprints melt away as though they’d never been there. Tony flashes his companion a smile.

“See? All better.”


Tony chokes on air, and Loki’s eyes go big and round.

“It was not- that is to say, we did not-” Loki insists, But Eir clucks her tongue and cuts him off.

“I don’t particularly want to hear what you have to say, my king. Naturally, you and yours are welcome to see me for any aid, but really. You could have healed the bruises on your own.”

She breezes away, off to tend to her other patients, and Tony bites his lip to stifle a grin. Neither of them had really put much thought into the results of Loki’s choke-hold until Eir grabbed hold of Tony and submitted him to an exam, ostensibly to ensure his trachea was unharmed. Spoiler: he’s fine. There was a little bit of bruising, no more than expected from the intimidation tactic, but otherwise Tony is unharmed. And hey, now that know that despite non-straight relationships being not-exactly legal, the royal doctor doesn’t seem to take issue. Which is good. Having a doctor on your side is always a plus.

The long day becomes even longer, though. It’s the second day of Loki’s rule, and he’s caught by an urgent messenger as they leave the infirmary.

“How does one lose a destroyer?” the trickster hisses, eyes narrowed. He takes off at a brisk pace, his hand firmly on Tony’s back to steer him along too. The guard falls into step.

“We do not yet know, your majesty. I came to you as soon as the destroyer’s absence was discovered.”

Tony tries to take a step to the side, to put some distance between himself and Loki for propriety’s sake, but Loki digs his fingers into Tony’s jacket and keeps him close.

“If I can protect no one else, I will protect you,” he hisses under his breath, and Tony’s eyes widen.
The alcoves in which the destroyers rest are distributed around the palace, although they are most concentrated in the vaults. The missing destroyer, however, is one that ought to be located in one of the palace’s towers, high above the ground. Two lifeless automatons, all angular and pointy and altogether intimidating, flank the empty spot, and Loki taps his staff against the ground, his face thunderous and dark.

“No one but the royal family may command the destroyers,” he growls. “And yet Mother is ill, Odin remains asleep, and Thor has been banished. How-” Loki stills for a moment, then whirls on the guard. “Find Odin’s bitch,” the trickster spits. “Now."

The guard snaps to attention and pelts off to command the others, and Tony glances at Loki to find the other’s eyes on him.

“She’s in line to the throne,” Tony realizes.

“So the destroyers would recognize her authority so long as those above her don’t naysay her commands, which I cannot do without locating the destroyer and giving it a command of my own.”

Tony takes Loki’s hand to stop him from wearing another hole into his palm. Loki twines their fingers together, gripping Tony’s hand tightly, but with nowhere near what Tony knows to be his full strength.

“There’s no central command center for these guys?”

“The Hlidskjalf acts as such, among other things, but it has not yet fully accepted me as king.” He shakes his head, thumb working rhythmically over the back of Tony’s hand. “I will try, though. We cannot risk such a thing running around unchecked. Come.”

Loki releases Tony’s hand, though he takes the inventor by the arm and all but drags him through the palace.

“Loki, babe, my legs aren’t as long as yours,” Tony protests. Their height difference isn’t huge, but it’s enough that Tony is having a little trouble keeping up with Loki’s long, rapid steps.

“We have no time, Tony. We must hurry.”

The palace is unnaturally quiet, but it isn’t until Loki pushes open the doors to the throne room that it becomes apparent why.

The coppery-thick scent of blood hits Tony before the sight does. Across the dark stone floor leading up to the throne, scarlet pools around the fallen bodies of the einherjar seep outwards. Living guards line the way leading up to the throne- traitors and turncoats, it’s immediately clear. Members of the Council of Nobles are scattered, each suspended in time, captured within a moment of battle against an enemy no-longer present. Tony swallows thickly, and Loki tightens his hold on Tony.

“Well you certainly took your time,” Mercel purrs from where she’s sprawled comfortably atop the throne.

The doors close behind them, trapping them. The gauzy, billowing fabric between the hall’s pillars have been replaced with something heavy and opaque, casting the hall in fire-lit darkness. The golden throne shines, though, as it has always been meant to. Mercel tilts her head, tracing her thumb over her bottom lip.

“Go find Thor,” Loki murmurs. Tony’s brow furrows.
“What?”

“Your strings. Use them. Find Thor, and bring him back.”

“I’m not leaving you alone with the Queen of Hearts, Lo.”

“She is queen of nothing!”

“Oh, I disagree,” Mercel pipes up, propping her chin in one hand. “First in line was Thor, but he’s been disowned. Next came you, but oh dear. You’re nothing but a monster, and a monster cannot rule. Frigga was third, but she’s indisposed, isn’t she. Such a tragedy. Untraceable. How ever will you capture the culprit?”

Loki snarls, and his entire body tenses like a cat ready to spring, but Tony holds out an arm to keep Loki in place, if only symbolically. Mercel’s teal-painted lips curve up in a smile.

“So I suppose that leaves me to hold down the fort, so to speak. After all, a headless monarchy will fall so sweetly when the wolves come to play.”

“You’re in my spot,” Loki growls, pushing past Tony to advance on Mercel. The would-be queen rises to her feet, a wickedly-curved blade unsheathing from somewhere Tony can’t trace. Loki holds the golden staff tightly in his hands, and the thing shrinks in size to something less ornamental, more manageable, and the trickster twirls the shortened spear.

It goes against everything Tony feels is right, to leave Loki. To abandon him to an unfair fight, while he goes haring off to track down Thor, but Loki needs backup, and with the Council of Nobles trapped, Frigga fighting for her life, and Odin asleep, Thor is all they have.

So he reaches out, finds what he hopes to be the right thread, and pulls.

Tony’s feet touch down in a puff of sandy dust, and immediately, he’s nearly overwhelmed by the dry heat. There’s a patch of shade against one canyon wall, and Tony takes full advantage of it. The steady rush of clear water ripples several paces away, dotted with scrubby plants on the riverbank. The sky is blue, and the air is still, and it doesn’t take long at all for Thor boisterous laughter to kick up from somewhere up the cliffside.

He shields his eyes and peers up. He’s able to make out carved entryways pockmarking the canyon wall, and he cups his hands around his mouth.

“Thor!” he shouts, voice echoing off the stone. The ginger pokes his head out from one of the entryways, and even from so far below, Tony can tell Thor is grinning.

“Friend Tony! How have you come to be in this place?”

Rather than waiting for some sort of ladder, Thor just fucking launches himself from the carved dwelling. Mjolnir swings like a propeller, guiding Thor’s descent. Rope and wood ladders unroll from the cliff-homes, and the Warriors Three and Sif clamber down. People trickle down after them, and one older woman decked in beads and jewelry of some blue-green stones steps forwards. Smaller children peer down at them from above.

The woman eyes Tony critically.

“Have you come to take the red-haired man and his friends?” she asks. “He has not been here more than two days, and already he has brought a beast to our home.”
If things hadn’t been so- so- so urgent, maybe Tony would have been amused by how quickly these people have apparently gotten sick of Thor, but as it is-

“Yes, we need to go. Wait. What beast?”

“A destroyer was deployed here this morning,” Hogun elaborates. “Is Loki truly so dishonorable that he would kill his own brother?”

“No- what? No. Look, Mercel is trying to take over. Odin’s in his Odinsleep thing, Frigga’s been poisoned, and somehow Mercel’s trapped all the nobles. Loki’s defending Asgard all by himself, and we need to go now.”

Thor stares at Tony without comprehension for a beat, but abruptly his face darkens in anger.

“Heimdall! To me!” he roars, holding Mjolnir to the sky.

Nothing happens.

Thor tries again, but again, nothing.

“Why does he not answer? I am worthy, now.”

Tony brushes his hands together and reaches out.

“Grab onto me, okay? I’ll get us back.”

“You are but a mortal,” Thor dismisses, and Tony makes a noise of frustrated anger.

“Just fucking do it, alright? We don’t have time for this.”

With a little cajoling, Tony ends up with Thor and his four buddies clinging to him. He takes a breath, and focuses. He’s never transported more than two people before. Or a person and a horse. He’s done that too, but now he’s got five people plus himself to deal with.

Alright. Alright. Loki needs help. He can do this.

With a flick of his wrist, Tony wraps his metaphysical fingers around the string to the throne room, and he gives it a tug.

The journey stretches out for a few seconds, passing by in a wash of black and blue and white, and the landing is anything but graceful, but they do arrive in the bloody throne room.

The empty bloody throne room.


“The Bifrost,” Thor murmurs, and Tony looks up at him.

“What?”

Thor’s eyes snap to Tony’s.

“We must go to the Bifrost.”

Thor strides over to one curtained archway, pulling the heavy divider down like tissue paper. In the
distance, a beam of light shoots off from the golden globe of the Bifrost. It’s sustained, less of a shot in the dark and more of a laser. Thor leaps into thin air again, Mjolnir sustaining his flight, and Tony immediately follows.

He pops into existence on the rainbow bridge to see Loki locked in battle against an Odin who’s very much awake. The old king has reclaimed his spear, but Loki uses a short staff nicked off one of the fallen einherjar. There’s a moment when Tony’s sudden appearance nearly allows Odin to shove Loki over the edge, but the trickster catches himself.

“Tony!” he shouts over the strained Bifrost’s whine. “Heimdall’s sword!”

Tony immediately sprints to obey. Heimdall himself is frozen in time, just like all the other Nobles like Freyja and Ullr. He launches himself up onto the dais and hooks his hands under the hilt. He pulls, throwing every ounce of strength into the desperate action, but arms wrap around him like a steel band and throw him across the floor.

He slams into the wall with a hiss, and he barely has time to reach out with his magic and shear a vaguely sword-shaped lump of sharp metal from the floor before Mercel brings her own sword down on him.

The crude mimicry of a weapon isn’t sturdy, and it won’t last long, but it doesn’t need to. All it needs to do is prevent Tony from being fucking stabbed.

The curved silver blade sparks against Tony’s defensive tool, and he brings up a foot to kick Mercel in the chest. This buys him just enough time to scramble up to his feet. Goddamnit, he doesn’t know how to use a sword.

Tony focuses on surviving, ducking and dodging most of the time rather than actively fighting.

“Run, mortal. Like the little mouse you are,” she croons. Her brass skin shimmers in the light. “This is what happens when you play amongst the cats.”

She slashes at him, and this time her sword catches in a groove of Tony’s shard of metal, and the tool is dragged from his hands.

Fuckfuckfuck runs in a steady stream through Tony’s head, and in an act of desperation, he tries something he’s never really tried without the gauntlets. He uses his metaphysical fingers to drag power from the reactor and into his palms, pooling the blue light in flat disks. He shoots off a low blast, and rusty burns blossom over her arm where it hits. He pulls his next punch, lessens the heat and intensifies the resonant energy, and the next shot drops her. He hopes he didn’t kill her. It might be nice actually get some fucking information out of her. Such as what the fuck.

Thor showed up while Toy was occupied, and he too seems to give up on removing Heimdall’s sword. Instead, he rears up and brings Mjolnir down, a spiderweb of cracks snapping through the Bifrost. He does it again, and again, and as the bridge finally shatters, the beam of light shooting off into space flickers out.

Further down the bridge, Loki still struggles against Odin. He might have been gaining an upper hand, but the shockwaves rippling through the Bifrost unsteady him just enough for Odin to cast aside his spear, and push.

Time pulls apart like taffy, and Tony watches in horrified shock as Loki disappears over the edge.

He doesn’t even think before leaping after him.
The Void yawns wide beneath them, inky black and utterly starless. The sound of air roaring past Tony’s ears nearly deafens him to Loki’s cry of ‘What have you done?’, but Tony tucks his arms close and straightens his legs, and he rockets down to Loki. He flares out his arms and legs, slowing his descent just enough to allow him to grab onto his lover, and Loki clings to him in return.

With a pop of blue, they impact against the Bifrost. It isn’t a neat, comfortable landing by any means, but in Tony’s defense, he might have panicked a little and grabbed the first string he could to stop their fall.

They lay there for a moment as their bodies and brains try to comprehend the fact that they are not actually plummeting to an unknown fate. Loki is the first one to truly come to his senses. He pushes Tony off of him and sits up, blinking windswept hair out of his eyes. Almost immediately, he delivers a painful punch to Tony’s ribs, fury written in his face.

“You absolute idiot,” he seethes. “What if you had been pulled into the Void with me? Have you the self-preservation instincts of a rock?”

“You could just say thank you and be done with it, you know,” Tony gripes, a hand braced over his ribs as he sits up. “Did we win? I think we won.”

Some distance away, Thor is kneeling beside Odin, who sits with his head tucked down against his chest. Loki helps Tony to his feet, and they cautiously approach.

“I do not- I do not- I do not-” the old king mumbles again and again, shaking his head. Thor’s blue eyes are concerned as he glances up at his brother and Tony. Loki’s lips thin out, and he joins Thor.

“Odin? Can you hear me?” the trickster prods. Odin doesn’t respond other than to latch onto the word ‘Odin’, which he mumbles on repeat like a broken record.

“He requires Eir’s aid,” Thor rumbles. Loki reluctantly agrees.

“How’d he get here anyway? Last I saw him he was asleep.”

“Mercel sent him to activate the Bifrost while she occupied me,” Loki explains, rocking back up to his feet. He surveys the damage done to the Bifrost. “I came to find him when she fled our fight, but he attacked me.” Loki gestures helplessly to the powerless Oculus. “I do not know what they intended to do, but it seems as though we’ve stopped them.”

Tony leaves Loki and Thor to muse over Odin, while he himself carefully navigate the cracked, partially-shattered Bifrost to enter the golden dome. Heimdall is still frozen in place, but Tony can’t exactly do much about that at the moment. Instead, he passes by Mercel’s unmoving body to instead inspect the sword-key. It’s been fused into place, the metal around it melted and warped. Whatever Mercel and Odin intended, they apparently wanted it to be pretty goddamn permanent.

“Tony!” Loki screams as white-hot pain spreads from beneath the inventor’s ribs. He looks down without comprehension to see the tip of a silver blade protrude from the flesh just below the reactor. As abruptly as it entered, the sword withdraws, and Tony tastes blood in his mouth.

“Oh,” he chokes, twisting to brace himself against Heimdall’s sword. Mercel stares at him with wild eyes, her mouth twisted in a snarl and sword painted red in her hands. Behind her, both Loki and Thor sprint to his aid, and then he’s falling, first his knees, then the rest of him colliding with the floor. Thor’s meaty hands press his red cape against the exit wound in Tony’s chest, but beyond
him, Tony witnesses an enraged Loki bearing down on Mercel.

He doesn’t see much after that.

Chapter End Notes

Shoutout to DarkInuFan for making a comparison I really found funny for whatever reason, and accurate too. They said Mercel was picking off the royal family like Rasputin with the Romanovs. I immediately thought of the movie Anastasia and the villain Rasputin from it.

Comments and kudos sustain me!
Interlude One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There’s a woman. Gaunt-faced and corpse-pale, she watches Tony with milky white eyes.

There’s a pull, as well. A path he knows he needs to walk. A river of souls he needs to join. But he remains, caught in the woman’s luminous gaze.

“Am I allowed to go or what?” he asks. He sounds like he’s caught in a padded room- no reverberation whatsoever.

Skeletal fingers trace thoughtfully over her mouth, and she smiles.

“Not yet, I think,” she murmurs, her voice echoing.

And that is that.

Chapter End Notes

This doesn't technically count as a chapter. It's just, you know. A little interlude. I was going to include it in chapter 37, but I think it's better as a little in-between moment. The next full chapter will be posted sometime tomorrow. Probably when I get out of my ornithology final.
Chapter Notes

Alright, so there's some sap here. Like a lot of fluffy, sappy, self-indulgent happy-times. It's a bit much, IMO, but I think they deserve a little happiness. To spite Infinity War, let them be happy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony is comfortable when he wakes up. The bed isn’t as nearly as large and luxurious as the one he shares with Loki, but it isn’t uncomfortable in the least.

His mouth tastes like garbage, though.

Tony licks his dry lips and pushes himself up onto his elbows. He finds himself in Eir’s ward, and an exhausted Loki occupies the narrow bed next to his. The trickster is out of his armor and dressed in more casual clothes, and Tony can’t help but smile at absolute bird’s nest his short hair has become while asleep. Despite Loki’s best efforts to keep his hair straight, when he sleeps, all bets are off.

“Hey babe,” Tony whispers, but Loki remains fast asleep. He’s reminded of their stay in Helheim, although admittedly their positions are reversed. Now Tony’s the one recovering from life-threatening injuries.

Speaking of which.

Pristine white bandages wrap his chest, and the arc reactor’s blue glow is muffled by the gauze. He picks at them, trying to find the end so he can unwrap his chest and see what the damage is, but as though sensing her patient’s restlessness, Eir appears.

“Don’t do that,” she snaps quietly, mindful of the sleeping prince. “I’ll sic Loki on you if I must. He’s been working himself into a frenzy, I’ll have you know.”

Eir brushes away Tony’s hands and fixes the bandages.

“How long was I out?”

He feels pretty damn good, all in all.

“Twelve days,”

Twelve- Tony blinks.

“That long?”

“The blade was poisoned. We only just managed to convince your body to begin healing two days ago. Accelerated, of course, but your heart did stop twice, and for seven hours towards the beginning, your lungs shut themselves down. You required a ventilator.”

Always with the heart.
Eir waves a light in front of Tony’s eyes, then switches tools to hold what looks to be an embroidery-hoop-thing in front of his chest. The metal’s surface shivers and provides a readout of runes and other symbols in the empty center, and Eir seems satisfied.

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to perform a blood transfusion when you’re the only one of your kind here? I had to synthesize your blood from scratch,” she grumbles, but her hands are gentle when she feels under Tony’s jaw. “No swelling. Good.”

“I’ll try not to get stabbed next time,” Tony jokes.

“Yes, that would be helpful.” Eir pushes Tony back into laying down. “Rest. The queen wishes to speak with you when you are well.”

Now that perks Tony right up.

“Frigga? She’s okay?”

“She would be better if she did as I said and remained resting, but yes. She is otherwise well.” Eir tucks her tools away in her apron.

A fluttering noise reaches Tony, followed by a startled and exasperated noise from one of the nurses. Eir makes a sound of irritation.

“That damned bird again.”

Right on cue, Dave comes to land on Tony’s bed, her momentum nearly toppling her forwards. She catches herself and ruffles her feathers. Eir makes to shoo her away, but Tony holds out a hand.

“No, let her stay,” he protests. Eir’s mouth forms a thin line, but she acquiesces.

“Only if you rest,” she bargains.

“Deal.”

As Eir glides away, Dave settles firmly on Tony’s stomach and bows her head, neck-feathers puffed up and begging for scratches. Tony obeys the bird, and before long she’s rubbing her hand into Tony’s palm, softly churring.

“Hi, Dave,” he hums, rubbing his thumb over the top of her beak. “You almost had to guide me to Hel.”

“That isn’t funny in the least,” Loki croaks, stirring in his bed.

“Gallows humor is always funny,” Tony disagrees.

“Except when it isn’t. Move.”

“I’m supposed to be resting,” Tony says, but the protest is empty. He scoots to allow Loki space, jostling Dave, who stands up and adjusts herself to nestle down in the crook of Tony’s leg.

“And you are indeed resting. With company.”

Loki strokes his fingers through the hair on the back of Tony’s head, and he presses his cool, dry lips to Tony’s.

“I should have killed her,” the trickster grumbles, cupping Tony’s stubbly jaw. His thumb strokes
soothing paths over Tony’s cheek, and Tony closes his eyes, resting his head in Loki’s hold.

“I’m almost angry you didn’t avenge me,” he says mildly.

“Thor was graced with a rare spark of wisdom,” Loki explains, and Tony hears him settle his head on the pillow. “He suggested we keep her to question later. She waits in the dungeons now.”

“Torture?” Tony clarifies, cracking an eye to look at his lover. He doesn’t- he isn’t Mercel’s biggest fan, to put it mildly, but he’s been on the other side of that table.

“No. Mother prefers the techniques of her home.” Loki speaks casually. “Similar to the game we played when you first arrived, but less… consensual. If she refuses to speak the truth, she will be forced to consume a draught stripping her of guile and loosening her tongue. It is invasive and violating, yes, but we must know what the dangers to this realm are.”

So yeah, Tony has reservations about the whole affair, but he’s going to bite his tongue on this one. ‘Interrogation techniques’ are a touchy subject. Which is more important? The individual rights of the interrogated? Or the continued life and wellbeing of the innocents positioned to be hurt or killed? Do you risk murder and assault and terroristic or treasonous actions and the deaths of many? Or do you violate the moral rights of a few individuals?

Better people than Tony have weighed in, and better people have failed to come to a decisive conclusion. He has his own opinions on what’s right, but it’s a morally grey area. The right thing in all things? Or the wrong thing for the right reasons?

Tony doesn’t know. He doesn’t.

Not to mention, as dearly as he loves Loki and Frigga, these people aren’t human. Human morals can’t always be applied to them.

Frigga convenes a council just a few days later. Odin has been declared mad, and to be perfectly honest, that’s completely accurate. He doesn’t know where he is. Doesn’t recognize people, even people he’s known for most of his life. He forgets and obsesses, and half of what he says isn’t rational. ‘Break the mirrors for the sun will see’ doesn’t make any sense, but Odin is emphatic in his order until he forgets again. No mirrors are truly broken. Odin isn’t in charge anymore.

Loki relinquished the throne, apparently. He’s tight-lipped about his reasons, but Tony gets the feeling Frigga was right when she said that Loki would chafe under the crown. There’s probably also the insidious little issue of Loki’s internalized- Tony doesn’t know what to call it. Racism? Jotuns aren’t a different race, they’re a different species. Xenophobia? Whatever it is, Tony worries his lover thinks himself unworthy to keep the throne even if he wanted it.

Thor too declined the throne of Asgard. Despite the people of what will someday be New Mexico (Tony regrettabley doesn’t know enough about pre-colonial history to name the culture) being not particularly thrilled with Thor’s presence, his crash-course in non-Asgardian culture was humbling. Tony learns, later that the whole reason he once more became ‘worthy’ was that Thor technically died for three minutes fighting a destroyer to protect his reluctant hosts.

But all that means Frigga now rules. She bears her station with grace and dignity and immediately gets right down to business.

“So the traitor Mercel was not working alone,” she says, standing before her ornate chain, ‘heading’ an honest-to-god round table. The Council of Nobles, like Freyja, Heimdall, and what appears to be an illusory representation of Idunn as she does the Asgardian version of a Skype call, are all
gathered and seated around the table. Thor sits at Frigga’s right, Loki at her left, and Tony directly beside Loki. Why he’s been included in the council meeting, Tony doesn’t know.

Frigga continues, faced by solemn silence.

“She serves a master little known to us, though I am sure we have all heard his name. He is called Thanos, the Mad Titan, He Who Courts Death. I have sent an envoy to the Titans of Saturn, to request that an ambassador familiar with this outcast come advise us.”

A three-dimensional star-map blinks to life above the center of the table as the windows filter out sunlight. A golden glow emanates from Asgard’s point, highlighting their current position.

“Due to Mercel’s manipulations, Odin used the Bifrost to open a portal here.” A pulsing line shoots out from Asgard’s point to a space far away, which necessitates the shifting of the entire map. It comes to a halt in a starless void. “We know that the purpose of this portal, which was fortunately closed due to the efforts of my sons and Tony Stark, was to allow the passage of Thanos into the heart of Asgard, but we do not yet know what forces he intended to bring. Scryers are working non-stop to break through the barriers surrounding this area. We need to know what precisely we will be dealing with.” Frigga pauses, placing her hands down on the table as she leans forward. Odin’s mistress has been in this court for centuries. Whatever the Mad Titan’s plans, I do not believe for a moment that a single defeat after so long an effort will sway him.”

The council room is silent enough that one might hear a pin drop.

“So what do we do?” Idunn’s representation asks.

“We prepare,” Freyja announces, throwing in her two cents. “Clearly this Mad Titan intends to invade. We must strengthen our defenses, replace those einherjar culled in the bitch’s rebellion.” She smacks a weighty hand against the table. “We must not be taken unaware.”

Her brother nods alongside her, but Heimdall insists, “We must first gather information. How are we to prepare when we do not know that which is coming?”

“If indeed anything is coming at all,” adds another bearded man whose name Tony’s can’t recall.

“Do we truly wish to hang our hopes, to wager our continued existence, on the possibility that this Mad Titan, this courter of Death, will give up?” Loki asks incredulously.

“Speaking of Death,” Frigga interjects. She turns to Loki and places a hand on his shoulder. “My son, will you ask your daughter what she knows of the Mad Titan?”

Loki blinks, almost as though not comprehending his mother’s request for a moment, but he licks his lips, very obviously biting back a smile.

“Naturally. It would be my pleasure.”

Things continue in this vein for a while. A hologram of Asgard- the entire planetary fragment, not just the golden city- is brought up to replace the star-map, and discussions begin on how to prepare, where to station troops, what weapons to commission. Orders are sent outposts to remain on guard. Messengers are dispatched to allies. And then, when the open, glassless windows once again allow sunlight to pour in, Frigga adjusts the jewels around her throat and smiles.

“Now let us speak of more pleasing matters. Regardless of what Mercel’s intentions were, success for her would have surely spelled disaster for us in our time of instability. Were it not for the Princes of Asgard, we would have doubtless been doomed.” She lifts her chin proudly, smiling.
“Tomorrow we shall honor our Princes for their heroism. I include in this Tony Stark, now of Asgard.”

Tony jerks to look at her in shock. Loki squeezes his knee beneath the table. His green eyes are slitted with cat-like satisfaction. Warm amusement colors Frigga’s expression.

“Tony Stark, you have always acted honorably, with the interests of my sons in your heart. You have saved Prince Loki’s life, retrieved Thor from banishment, and nearly gave your own life in the defense of our realm. You have proven yourself noble in heart and mind, and even braver in deed. Therefore, I grant you as sovereign ruler, the immortality of the gods. I create you Prince Tony Stark, God of Creation.”

There are murmurs of ‘Prince Tony’ from around the table, inclined heads, and beside him, Loki doesn’t bother to conceal his happiness any longer. Tony, meanwhile, is still struggling to wrap his genius-brain around the concept of immortality. Immortality. Him. What?

“When you are honored tomorrow, you shall be provided with a golden apple to cement your place in this court, and your titles shall be made official. Welcome home, Tony.”

The queen lays her hand on Tony’s head for a brief moment, and then the Council is adjourned.

Tony’s still reeling when Loki nudges him behind a pillar to steal a kiss. The prince’s cool fingers stroke over his jaw, and Loki positively beams.

“Did you ask her to do that?” Tony manages. Him, a prince? An alien prince? What?

“No. She petitioned Odin for an apple on your behalf some months ago, but she was denied. Now that she is sovereign, though…” Loki flashes a grin that might have been frightening had Tony not know him as well as he does.

“She can do whatever the fuck she wants.”

“Including,” Loki emphasizes, preening at the memory. “Including acknowledging my children. Or Hel, at least.” He shakes his head, and smooths back a rebellious strand of hair that works its way free. “No one has spoken of them at court since their banishments.”

“I’m happy for you, babe. Do you think they’ll be allowed back?”

“I do not know. Hel, I know, if needed in his realm, but my others? I do not know. One cannot be found, that is for certain. Another cannot be retrieved. Jormungandr and Fenrir, though? It will depend on the moods of the realm. Mother is sovereign queen, yes, but she must also remain accountable to our people.” Loki looks thoughtful. “Sleipnir, however… He is a shapeshifter, and very, very good with horses. He is bound to shepherd Odin’s horses in the fields, but Odin is no longer king.” Delight colors Loki’s voice. “We must see him. Oh, we must bring him home.”

Frigga grants them dispensation to go retrieve Sleipnir at once.

“He shall have a place of honor at the table,” Frigga assures her son. Loki guides Tony, tells him where to go, but Tony does the heavy-lifting and transports them to hilly green fields. Trees dot the grassy landscape, and Tony manages to set down within the confines of a cultivated orchard. Loki immediately strides towards the isolated building, and Tony rushes to catch up.

“Hey, I’m not a god yet. Slow down for the mortal,” Tony protests, but his heart isn’t in the chastisement, and Loki has a one-track mind for the moment, contrary to his usual multitasking ways.
The prince doesn’t announce himself. He simply casts open the doors, startling a young, freckled man with chestnut-brown skin and eyes so pale a blue they’re nearly white. The man’s wild, tight-black curls flare out in a halo around his head, and he stares as Loki sweeps closer.

“Father?” he manages in utter disbelief before Loki’s arms encircle him and pull him into a crushing hug.

“My boy,” the prince murmurs, as Sleipnir sinks into the hold and returns the embrace. “Look how you’ve grown! You were hardly past my hip when I last saw you.”

Sending a kid who’s not much taller than Loki’s hip to manage horses isn’t a great- it sound kind of dumb to Tony, but Odin never really made sense to him anyway.

“Father what- how? Why are you here? I thought-”

“Odin no longer holds the throne,” Loki explains, cupping his son’s face between pale hands. His thumbs stroke over Sleipnir’s cheeks. “And Frigga, now rightful and ruling queen, has decreed your isolation at an end.”

Sleipnir’s teeth flash in a wide, full-lipped grin. He looks so much like Loki in that moment that Tony’s heart nearly breaks.

“I may come home?”

“You may.”

Loki presses his lips to his son’s forehead, while Sleipnir laughs and smiles and peppers his father with question after question after question.

From what both father (mother, technically, as Tony learns) and son say, Sleipnir has been confined to the hills, bound to tend Odin’s horses and see to their breeding and care and training in something of a reverse of the spell used to keep specific people out of an area. While Loki had been forbidden seeing his son, Sleipnir had been forbidden from leaving, rather than acknowledging his existence to the general populace.

He apparently also turns into a massive eight-legged horse. Which freaks Tony out a bit when he sees the shapeshifter in action. He doesn’t like hoofed things.

The horse-form, however, is apparently useful in rounding up the free-ranging horses. Tony didn’t know this, but herds of horses have dominance structures, and Sleipnir, as the biggest and baddest of the bunch, can easily bully the others into obedience. He guides the numerous horses- separated by sex with mares and geldings in one area, and stallions in another- to more enclosed pastures. No one would dare steal the royal family’s horses, Sleipnir explains, but he’s wary of the bigger predators picking them off if he’s not present, and the enclosed pastures are warded.

When Sleipnir shapeshifts back again, he cycles through a variety of skin and hair colors and styles before settling again on his favored freckled brown body and curly-kinked hair. His eyes remain that same pale, pale blue no matter the other colors.

“So you’re my father’s lover, I assume?” Sleipnir springs on Tony not much later, throwing a muscled arm around the inventor’s shoulders. Tony flinches out of the unexpected touch, and Sleipnir, though confused, does not pursue him.

“Why would you assume that?”
Sleipnir shrugs. “Don’t worry, I don’t mean anything by it. It’s just, he brought you here, and you don’t seem the type to be brought along as brainless brawn. Anyways, you needn’t worry about judgment from me.” Sleipnir flashes his teeth in another grin. “After all, my sire was a horse.”

“Sleipnir,” Loki admonishes. Tony’s eyes light up.

“No fucking way. Loki, you seriously fucked a horse? That’s true?”

Loki looks distinctly uncomfortable.

“You needn’t sound so excited,” Loki gripes. “It was a perfectly reasonable decision at the time, and I received a son from the encounter. It’s hardly remarkable otherwise.”

“You’re a horse-fucker.”

“One! One horse!” Loki holds up a narrow finger defensively. “Just the one.”

“He was a bastard anyway. Didn’t even stick around to meet me,” Sleipnir dismisses, though he doesn’t sound particularly torn-up about it. He winds up a series of tiny clockwork automatons, and they increase in size as they tick to life until they’re about Tony’s height. “So. I’m ready to go. Can we go? Please?”

The automatons will apparently care for the horses until a new horsemaster is decided. Sleipnir, though he enjoys caring for the animals, is tired of seclusion.

Tony teleports the three of them back to Asgard in a burst of his usual blue, and Sleipnir is ecstatic. Dave is delighted too. Hel cannot come to meet her brother, but she certainly has no qualms sending her messengers to mob him and caw and crow at him as he strokes their feathers. Frigga receives her grandson with eagerness. Sleipnir is a little more reserved around her than he was with Loki and Tony in private, but he lets the queen take his hands and welcome him home.

And so one of Loki’s kids comes home. He’s given his own permanent room, full access to the horses kept in the palace stables and the opportunity to oversee the stables should he choose, and at the feast to honor the ‘Princes of Asgard’, Frigga makes a point of acknowledging him and welcoming him home, making her stance clear for all who might grumble.

Before the feast, however, is the ceremony.

It’s reminiscent of Thor’s botched coronation, although no one invades this time. More natural light illuminates the space, and flowers and tapestries and banners adorn the pillars. The tapestries seem to shift and move, the woven figures on them quite clearly the two princes and Tony, both in armor and out. It’s like the Harry Potter paintings or something.

The three of them walk down the aisle together, side by side by side. They kneel before Frigga where she stands atop the throne’s dais.

There’s a speech. Of course there is. Frigga’s impossibly good with words. She speaks of devotion, bravery, and courage. She speaks of honor, and growth, and nobility. She speaks of resilience, of intelligence, of skill. She calls each of them up individually. First Thor, to receive her blessing and praise. Then Loki, to receive the same. And then Tony.

He walks up the steps to stand before Frigga, and for once, he’s not entirely sure what to do. Sure, he’s been in the public eye all his life, but that’s almost all been an act. You have to put on a show for the general masses. But this? It feels like family. Like family, telling him they’re proud.
He doesn’t want to wear a mask for that.

So he swallows and keeps his eyes on Frigga as she sings his praises. She pauses after her words, and smiles.

“For your courage and service to this realm, I give to you this apple.” She produces the round, shiny-gold fruit, and Tony accepts it in his hands. “For your wit and craft, I name you God of Creation. Choose your seal, and forever shall it be recorded in Asgard’s history.” He accepts the blank disk of gold-toned metal, which he’s been told he’ll need to inscribe with whatever he intends his seal to be, once he thinks of it. “And for your devotion to my family, Tony Stark of Asgard, I name you prince.”

“Your majesty,” he murmurs, bowing his head. He turns and joins Thor and Loki on a lower step to face the gathered crowd.

“People of Asgard!” Frigga calls, extending her hands on either side. “Behold your honored princes!”

The people of Asgard are fickle and ever-changing. Where not long prior they had condemned Loki to an eternity of torture, now they cheer for his name. Where they had mocked and ridiculed Tony as a whore, now they applaud him as a prince. The nature of public life, as Tony knows well.

But it doesn’t matter, at the moment. For the time being, all that matters is that they’re safe, and secure, and Frigga is alive and well, and Sleipnir has come home.

There’s a feast, and the feast is where Frigga publicly recognizes Sleipnir. The feast is where there’s a big commotion about watching Tony eat the apple, sweet and juicy and crisp-core and stem and all. The smoldering eyes Loki casts his way stirs warmth in his gut. He knows without being told, just from that look, that his lover wants nothing more than to lick the juice from his fingers.

But they’re in public, and Frigga has a long way to go, many subtle changes to make, much PR management to perform, before two men or two women, or any other grouping besides one man and one woman will be publicly acceptable. It’s doubtless that everyone knows about Loki and Tony’s relationship, but no one says anything overtly anymore, because they are discreet.

Frigga, however, catches Tony and Loki as they take a break from the feast, taking in the cool night air on a balcony.

There’s some idle chatter, some warm well-wishes and many expressions of gratitude, before Frigga smiles a sly smile and says, “You know? I think it’s wonderful that we have precedents set of accepting foreign domestic policy when dignitaries from other realms come to visit.” She tilts her head, as Loki presses a hand gently against Tony’s back. “My uncles, for instance. They were married by the laws of Vanaheim. Though such a marriage would not be considered legal under our laws, we must nonetheless observe their union in order to respect the laws of their realm.” Tony leans into Loki’s side as she side-eyes them. “Hypothetically speaking, I’m certain such precedent would protect a union of two Asgardians wedding under Vanaheim’s laws as well.”

“Hypothetically speaking,” Loki agrees.

“Oh yes of course. Hypothetically speaking.”

Frigga’s eyes sparkle with warmth as she places her hands on Tony’s and Loki’s shoulders, and with a lingering touch, she leaves them again to preside over the ongoing feast. Tony knows
exactly where this is going even before Loki turns and pushes Tony up against the balcony railing. Once upon a time, Tony might have been afraid of tumbling over the edge, but Loki’s hold is firm, and safe.

“Marry me,” Loki murmurs, lips brushing against Tony’s ear.

“Hypothetically speaking?”

“You are an ass.”

“You like my ass.”

“That I do. Marry me.”

“I dunno,” Tony waffles, playing at indecision. “You’re not exactly doing this properly.”

Loki’s teeth nip at Tony’s ear in admonishment, but the prince sinks down to his knees, taking Tony’s hands in his own.

“You will marry me.”

“Don’t I get a say in this?”

Tony is tugged down to kneel along with Loki, and he cups the mage’s face, bringing their lips close together.

“None at all,” Loki breathes.

Tony grins. He knows Loki well enough to know without a doubt that if Tony truly said no, Loki would back off in a heartbeat. He bridges the scant gap for a kiss, then says:

“Well alright then. Let’s get married.”

Chapter End Notes

I crave validation! Comments and Kudos for the win!
Thirty Eight

Chapter Notes

A lot of stuff happens here!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Plans are made, mainly by Loki and his mother. Tony tries to sit in on some of the planning sessions, but oh my god. It’s a lot of- a lot of choosing colors and deciding on flowers and standing still to be fitted for clothes. It’s not as bad as it could be, but Loki is very particular in his tastes, and Tony doesn’t want to get in the prince’s way. He kisses Loki on the mouth, gives him free reign, and decides to take whatever comes his way.

In the meantime, he’s curious.

Morbidly curious. There’s a certain bronze-skinned beauty hidden in the dungeons, and call him crazy, but Tony sort of wants to go poke the beast. That, and he wouldn’t mind flaunting his survival in Mercel’s metallic face. Loki is staunchly opposed to the idea- doesn’t want Tony going anywhere near the bronze bitch. But once Tony gets an idea in his head, it’s very, very difficult to sway him.

He manages to convince Loki not to play bodyguard, to go be with his son instead. No, instead some nameless guard (who actually does have a name, as Tony learns. It’s Bjorn) accompanies Tony down into the honeycomb of cells. A few people growl and slam their fists against the shimmering force fields enclosing them, but for the most part, the people trapped within ignore Tony and Bjorn as the dungeonmaster guides them deeper within. They embark on an ivory platform, which rises steadily along shining tracks to bring them level with Mercel’s cell. She’s all alone, lounging on a cot pressed up against one wall, but she looks up when Tony comes into view.

Mercel’s in rough shape. Peeking out from beneath the beige shift, Tony sees the rusty burns from his freeform repulsor blasts starting to heal, but she’s a mess of purple-brown bruises. She sports a split lip pulled thin when she smiles, and as she sits up and prowls closer to the cell’s force field, Tony can see a neat cut across her throat- one which would certainly have been fatal if it had gone any deeper than the dark purple scabbing suggests.

Tony can just imagine it, and the thought is- well. It’s hotter than it should be. Loki with a knife at Mercel’s throat for Tony’s sake? Stopped only by his brother’s pleading? Yeah, something’s probably wrong with him.

Whatever. Loki loves him anyways.

“I see the mouse yet lives,” Mercel purrs. Her snow-white hair is meticulously-braided.

“Yeah, sorry. I’m sure you did your best, but we can’t all be winners. How’s life in Asgard’s finest cell?”

“Comfortable. Soothing. Court life was so…” She tips her hand. “Chaotic. The peace will do me good. Give me time to rest while I wait.”
“Wait for what?” he immediately follows up. The predatory glimmer in her sharp eyes makes him believe it wasn’t a slip of the tongue.

“Your noble queen already knows, does she not? Unless she’s forgotten already. Turned a blind eye on me yet again for lack of power to act.”

“This Thanos guy? Uh, yeah. Right. One guy against Asgard. Sounds like a real good time.”

“Tony Stark of Nowhere. Or is it ‘of Asgard’ now?” She leans against the force field, stroking her fingers suggestively down the shimmering surface. “I have seen him burn civilizations far greater than this nest of rats. I watched my people fall on his command, while he chose me alone for a higher, greater purpose.” Her teeth flash in a hostile grin. “He holds the favor of Death, Tony Stark. When he comes, there will be no escape. And as he slaughters this so-called noble family, I will so enjoy painting my hands in your blood. Red always was my favorite color.”

He’s not entirely sure why Mercel has a vendetta against him in particular. He obnoxiously sucks his teeth and arches his back- popping his spine comfortably- before regarding her again the way he once did the various nobodies who would try to threaten him when he ran a company.

“Welp. That’s nice. Good luck with that. So, uh, will you be painting your hands before or after we kick your lover-boy’s ass?”

Mercel tilts her head to look at Tony through white lashes.

“His lover is Death, Tony Stark. Not I. And She is insatiable.”

“I’ve met death, actually. She’s pretty sweet.”

“You monster’s bastard daughter?” Mercel smirks. “She is not Death. You will know when you meet her, Tony Stark. I will send you as a gift on my master’s behalf.”

He sees red, for a moment. Tony grinds his teeth so hard they might shatter, his nails digging into his palm, but he forces himself to relax. She's not going to get a rise out of him. There’s a niggling feeling in the back of his head that tells Tony he’s probably missing something. That there’s something he should know but doesn’t. It’s not his favorite feeling.

“Sure. Right. Well I’m gonna go now. It was good to see you, really. Have fun in crazy-town, babe. Hang in there. Maybe, uh, maybe think on how nice it is to be here, rather than with your master telling him how you failed.”

He should find someone to make the classic office poster to hang in her cell. As the only piece of decoration, it would be hilarious.

The visit doesn’t last long. No more than a few minutes, really. Tony’s satisfied. He knows Loki’s going to grill him for details, so if there’s anything important in Mercel’s little posturing-event, they’ll pick up on it pretty quick. The whole ‘favor of Death’ thing might be- that might be kind of relevant. They’ll see. Frigga’s already said that he courts Death, but Mercel makes it sound like the courting is literal. Is that new information? Maybe. Maybe not.

In any case, Tony has to sit through several long minutes of Loki fussing over him when he returns from the dungeons. The prince palms at the angry red scar- healing quickly only thanks to Eir’s technology- beneath his reactor as if to ensure Mercel’s mere presence hasn’t reopened the wound. Tony rolls his eyes and bats away Loki’s wandering hands.
“Jesus, you’re insatiable,” he teases.

Loki fixes Tony with a baleful glare, and very pointedly takes Tony’s face between his hands. Tony rolls his eyes and turns to press a kiss to Loki’s palm.

“I am worried,” Loki corrects without humor. “I do not like her near you.”

“So I won’t go see her again. I just wanted to, y’know, rub it in her face. That I’m fine. And immortal now.” Tony grins. “She’s batshit crazy, babe.”

“Yes. I thought we had established that when she attempted to murder my family, overthrow the kingdom, and then stabbed you.”

“Relax, Lo. Relax. Deep breaths. We stopped the bad guy. You stopped the bad guy. And, uh, just saying. It’s hotter than it should be to know you’d kill for me. Like, really hot.” He squirms up to press against Loki, batting liquid brown eyes up at Loki.

The prince isn’t fooled, nor is he distracted. He simply presses a hand to Tony’s reactor and pushes him away until a few inches of space stretch between them.

“You say you were once a great seducer,” Loki drawls. Tony makes an affronted noise.

“Once?”

“And yet not once have I seen proof.”

“I got you didn’t I?”

“Yes. What ever was I thinking?”

“Fuck off, smartass.”

“Perhaps later.”

Loki wraps a lanky arm around Tony’s shoulders and pulls the god of fucking creation along through the halls. Tony can’t help but grin.

“You know, she thinks that Thanos guy is in a legitimate relationship with the manifestation of death. Not Hel, but death itself. Herself.”

“So we have heard, but Death does not—” Loki’s lips thin. “Death does not interact with the physical with any frequency. So infrequent are her interactions that many do not believe she quite exists. They consider Death to be no more than a process, rather than a being. So why would Death take a lover who, compared to her, is mortal? Why would she favor this one outcast over the rest of the universe?”

“You don’t believe it?”

“Correspondents from Titan believe he is mad. I myself do not know enough yet, but no. I do not trust Mercel’s claims. I trust what we have seen, and I trust what our sources tell us.” Loki hums softly to himself. ”I suppose I had best refresh my own contacts. It has been several years since last I needed to pull knowledge from the reaches of the Nine.”

It’s only been a few days, but already a delegate from Titan is set to arrive within the next twenty four hours. No word has reached Asgard or her allies of Thanos’s presence within the Nine Realms, but there are planets beyond. Galaxies elsewhere. No definitive information exists on
where precisely Thanos and his army is located, but it’s only a matter of time before the Mad Titan is hunted down, or forces the hands of the Nine.

In the meantime, there’s a wedding to plan.

Tony might have expected a royal wedding to be a lavish affair, attended by all the nobles and officials and bureaucrats who come crawling out of the woodwork for this sort of thing. That’s certainly how it goes on Earth. A media circus.

Not so on Vanaheim.

The ceremony is simple and surprisingly short. Morgan officiates, speaking mainly of fidelity and compassion and patience. Frigga’s parents, sisters, and uncles attend, as does Thor, Eir, Unnur, and Sleipnir. Dave watches along with a small murder of other crows from the trees beneath which Loki and Tony stand.

Their hands are bound together with purple silk, and Loki lets Tony move his dagger-ring from the right hand to his left. Apparently with Asgardians, they don’t really do rings. That’s a Midgardian thing, but Loki indulges him, providing a gold ring studded with green emeralds for Tony to wear in return.

As symbol of marriage on Asgard, the wedded individuals exchange personal colors. Hence the emeralds. Tony will wear Loki’s green and gold, and Loki will wear a bracelet of gold and rubies, and that, as they say, will be that.

They drink from a shared cup of first something bitter and acidic, then from a cup of cloyingly-sweet honey-wine, and then Morgan pronounces them married.

The silk ribbon remains in place for the entirety of the feast as they eat and drink and dance. There are wedding gifts, because of course there are, and the celebration lasts an entire four days. When they return to Asgard, Tony has a husband.

Tony has a husband. And a wife. And a spouse. A partner. Tony is married. Who the fuck ever thought that was going to happen? Christ. Tony Stark, married. Not only that, but married and effectively immortal, so long as he eats another of Idunn’s apples about once every decade. Because of the first apple, he’s pretty much guaranteed to live at least two millennia, but he’ll still age, albeit very, very slowly. With the apples, though, he’ll stick around indefinitely. He’ll get to control how fast he physically ages based on how frequently he eats the apples. That’s wild. Not to mention the physical aspects. The silver streaks in his hair have darkened slightly, closer to pale brown than white. His heart is strong; his body is fit; his eyes are sharp; he’s doing well.

Loki flaunts the marriage. They don’t hide anymore. They share a permanent room together, for fuck’s sake. It’s the innocent stuff too, that draws judgmental glances and whispers. Holding hands. A peck on the cheek. Loki tugging playfully at Tony’s once-more short hair and complaining about the lack of length. People see. People talk. People judge.

But they have the good fortune of being called Princes of Asgard, with Frigga’s direct support and the laws of Vanaheim to protect them. So Tony doesn’t worry. He doesn’t give a fuck. If people want to judge him, he may as well give them the whole story to judge him on.

Elder rolls all four of his great violet eyes when Tony and Loki tell him of their wedding.

I have never understood the need to institutionalize a bonding, he grumbles. Loki huffs and crosses her arms.
“Perhaps that is why we did not invite you,” she grumbles right back. Elder’s rumbling, crashing laughter echoes around the cave.

_No, little one. You did not invite me because a great big beast such as I would not fit in your hall, not to mention would terrify all your little guests._

“The wedding was outside,” Loki sniffs.

Elder merely shakes his head and powers on through their lesson for the day. He does, however, stop them from leaving come the end of their time. While Loki and Tony wait, Elder slithers down beneath the sea of gold, and Tony will never understand how such a massive creature can essentially swim beneath a pile of treasure without displacing any of it. He just doesn’t understand.

“Magic,” Loki helpfully supplies.

“Shut up,” Tony sulks right back.

Elder resurfaces with a soft fabric bag, which upon further inspection houses two small, rounded, silver-purple object about the size and shape of quail eggs. Elder settles down again as he explains what exactly the two things do.

_They are a matched set, forged from the same node of metal, and tempered together. When one is destroyed, so the other shall melt. There is nowhere in the universe that one cannot find the other. Keep these with you, and you will never be lost._

Tony takes one of the smooth, intricately-etched lumps of metal. It shimmers like purple oil-slick as he rolls it in his hand.

“You big softy, you,” he laughs. A puff of smoke escapes Elder’s nostrils.

_If you continue to tease me, I shall take them back. I was simply given to believe it is customary among your cultures to give gifts in celebration of a bonding._

“Thank you most kindly, Elder,” Loki says, kicking Tony none-too-subtly in the ankle. “We shall treasure this gift.”

_Naturally._

They take their leave, but before Tony flashes them back home to Asgard, they test their gifts.

A silver thread of light extends in a perfectly straight line from one to the other, and as Tony and Loki scramble around like a pair of curious children, the line never falters, swinging around to connect the locators. Once they hit over six feet of distance, the center of the thread vanishes into nothingness, but the fragments attached to each of their locators remain bright and strong. Tony grins.

“That’s awesome. Potentially creepy, but mostly awesome.”

Loki flicks her locator off, but Tony’s remains lit until he deactivates it as well. Tony’s wife- his wife- swoops in to kiss him, and Tony grins against Loki’s lips.

“You must keep this with you at all times,” Loki demands. Tony tosses his locator in the air, before catching it again and tucking it away in the weightless bag tied to his belt. It’s something of a pocket dimension tied to a physical anchor, to keep it with him at all times. Anything he needs, he can hide away in there.
Loki activates her locator once more to ensure it remains functional even with it’s match in the pocket dimension, and once satisfied, she vanishes her half of the set as well.

“I could say the same to you. You get into so much trouble, it’s a wonder I don’t keep you tied to the bed.”

“Promises, promises.” she purrs, but her eyes are soft and green and warm.

They abscond with their treasures, though they don’t return immediately to Asgard. They take a roundabout path, to pick up a sample of alloy Tony’s never heard of before. He locks himself away in the workshop for a week after that, alternating between running tests and playing with magically-liquefying and shaping the alloy, and finishing up Mark III-B. When he emerges, Mark III-B is fully operational. JARVIS interfaces perfectly with the new suit, which Tony dons eagerly.

The monkeys screech and hop around, happy to have finally helped produce something big and interesting. Blinky scales up Tony’s back to rap its knuckles against the helmet, and Tony picks the creature up by the scruff and sets it back down.

“None of that, you little brat,” Tony admonishes.

He gives each of his monkeys a stroke on the head, and flips the faceplate down. The HUD immediately flashes to life.

“All systems online,” JARVIS informs him, and Tony grins.

“Then let’s go!”

Tony marches over to the open wall leading out into thin air. Were this any suit in the past, and any time in the past, Tony would have chosen to undergo tests in the lab first. However, he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that if something should fail, he can catch himself with his teleportation magic. So long as he’s conscious, he doesn’t need to worry about plummeting to his doom.

“Sir, might I suggest waiting-”

“Jay, what have I told you? Sometime you’ve gotta run before you can walk.”

So he engages the repulsors, and he flies.

He takes two laps around the palace, drawing plenty of stares and pointing fingers, before making a beeline to Unnur’s workshop. She is, predictably, delighted to see the full, complete suit in person after the little teases he showed her in the beginning. It takes approximately three minutes for her to start pointing out everything she would do differently, but Tony simply rolls his eyes and fends off the geese, which apparently are offended by the color red. Either that or they’re just assholes. It could be that too.

It’s definitely that.

The armor retracts shakily, all but spitting Tony out before the plates rattle and close up again. Tony stumbles forwards from the unsteady ejection, swearing as an angry goose immediately assaults his leg in a flurry of nipping beak and flapping wings, while Unnur laughs her ass off and bends down the pet the remaining goose.

“God fucking damnit! Get your fuck-ass geese in check,” Tony yelps, scrambling up onto a workbench. The goose hisses at him and rustles its wings before waddling back to Unnur. The
smith strokes the bird’s long neck while the animal grumbles at her.

“Not my fault they don’t like you,” Unnur snorts. She approaches the free-standing suit and pokes and prods at the plating.

“They’re your minions.”

Tony crosses his legs, carefully settling himself more steadily amongst the clutter piled up one the sturdy stone table. JARVIS obligingly retracts outer plating to give Unnur a look at the inner workings.

“‘Minion’ implies they listen to me.”

While Tony’d envisioned this moment a little differently- sequestered atop a table by threat of goose wasn’t in the plan- he’s pleased to have Unnur so interested in the finished Mark III-B. He’d learned blacksmithing earlier in life, and it had saved his life in Afghanistan, but years of letting the skill fall to the wayside had sort of rendered it a lost skill. Unnur had been absolutely essential in reteaching him everything.

“How’s Idunn doing?”

That never fails to pull a blush and a gentle smile out of the otherwise-brusque smith. Unnur hides her sappy face by urging JARVIS to open up the chest plates, letting her inspect the body cavity.

“She’s doing really well. Um, I mean the recent- That Mercel cunt sorta rattled her with the whole ‘coup’ thing. She’s linked to her garden, y’know? She’ll die if she’s away for longer than a few hours. I think realizing Mercel could’ve kicked her out if she’d kept the throne scared her.”

“Why would anyone do that? She’s the one with the magic apples.”

“The grove has survived changes in stewardship before, according to our history, and Idunn is loyal to the current royal family.”

Unnur says this as though it explains everything, and perhaps it does.

“I mean, I knew Odin had a mistress. I just didn’t realize-”

“That she was plotting murder and treason?”

“Yeah, that.”

“No one did, I guess. Christ, if I never have to see her free, it’ll be too soon.”

“I’ll drink to that. Civil wars suck ass, from what I hear. Can I-?”

She gestures to the now-open front of the suit. Tony shrugs one shoulder.

“Why not? Feel free. JARVIS, ride-along protocol.”

Unnur knows all about JARVIS now, and when she steps into the suit, the plates close up around her. Tony watches as she stumps around the room and wriggles her fingers, but it’s mainly JARVIS at the helm. Ride-along protocol dictates that the person inhabiting the armor be given rudimentary mobility, but nothing past what one might receive from having a fully-functioning set of limbs.

“This display-thing is giving me a headache,” Unnur complains, voice modulated by the suit’s speakers. “Otherwise, I guess it’s cool.”
“You guess?” Tony repeats in mock-outrage. He picks up a file and chucks it in her direction. JARVIS takes control in an instant, hand snapping up to catch the file with a clack of metal on repulsor-crystal.

“I have been told throwing things is not nice,” JARVIS admonishes.

The faceplate flips up to reveal Unnur’s wide grin.

“Now he is amazing. JARVIS is a wonder.”

“Thank you, Lady Unnur. I find your budding empire to be quite the feat as well.”

Tony flicks the citrine embedded in his vambrace in playful admonishment. JARVIS is such a suck-up. The citrine delivers a sharp shock to Tony’s hand, and the inventor yelps, jerking backwards and nearly toppling over in surprise.

JARVIS releases Unnur, and the smith pads across the room to check on him.

“What’s wrong?”

“JARVIS shocked me!” Tony growls, glaring at the vambrace. “What the hell? What happened to ‘Your safety is my top priority, sir’?”

He attempts to mimic JARVIS’s accent, and all the while, Unnur is absolutely dying laughing.

“You yourself have always encouraged me to defend myself, Sir,” JARVIS replies innocently, so sweetly that butter wouldn’t melt in his non-existent mouth.

“Since when can you even do that? I didn’t design that feature.”

“You created me to learn and develop on my own. You have no one to blame but yourself.”

“So it’s my fault. Great. Do you see this shit?” he demands of Unnur, gesturing to the suit, which is now under JARVIS’s control. “My own son turning against me. You promised you wouldn’t use HAL as a role model!”

“I will be a benevolent overlord.”

“Don’t make me reset you.”

“I can’t let you do that, Tony.”

Tony does fall off the table now, and between his heaving, gasping laughter and the sudden angry assault of two geese buffeting his head, Tony curls up with his arms shielding his head, tears streaming down his face.

“Tony I don’t understand,” Unnur cackles, wrapping her arms around one goose to pull it away. JARVIS stomps over and takes hold of the other goose with careful, shiny-red fingers, and Tony rolls over onto his back. He wipes the wetness from his face, grinning like a loon, and flops his arms out to either side.

“It’s a pop-culture reference from my time and place. An intelligent construct takes over a spaceship. And then weird shit happens. Like, really weird. It’s a classic.”

“I wish I could see your home. I’d like to see all that weird shit.”
“Oh yeah, and non-straight marriages are a legal thing in my country.”

“Fuck, if only.”

“Believe me. If I could take you I would.”

If it weren’t for the whole ‘back in time’ thing compounded with the ‘alternate universe’ issue. He’s just all the Star Trek tropes, isn’t he. All they need is a fuck-or-die situation and a unicorn-dog.

Loki comes to find him as he’s flying back. His partner wears the shape of an eagle, and the cheeky fucker lands on Tony’s back. He can hear the clack of massive talons digging for purchase between the plates of armor, and behind the faceplate, he rolls his eyes. A loud clang reverberates through the helmet, and JARVIS lets Tony know Loki has essentially hammered the metal with his wickedly-curved beak.

“You’re such an asshole,” Tony complains through the speakers. “You know, having an oversized chicken on my back kinda ruins the badass image I’ve got going on.”

Loki doesn’t deign to respond until they’re back in the workshop. The eagle flutters to perch on a piece of half-finished machinery, watching with a cocked head as the armor gracelessly spits Tony out again. He’ll work on that eventually, smooth out the transition process, but for not it’s an achievement.

As soon as he’s free, Loki launches into the air again, and this time alights smack-dab on Tony’s head. He freezes immediately. As much as he trusts Loki- with his life, his heart, his fucking soul-, eight razor-sharp talons are now pressed into his scalp. Loki dips down to stick his face in Tony’s, and the inventor rubs a thumb around the feathered ear-hole.

“Why can’t you let me look cool?”

Loki nips gingerly at his fingers, but he lets Tony carefully lift his bird-body from his head. Tony deposits the surprisingly-heavy eagle form on a relatively-clear spot of the workbench, and in a crackle of green light, Loki sits there, legs daintily-crossed as he leans back on his arms, half-reclined.

“Tony, darling, I’ve seen you tickling Blinky while Inky tangled wires in your hair. You’ve forfeited your right to ‘cool’.”

“Everyone likes an adorable idiot. That doesn’t ban me from ‘cool’,,” Tony protests, gripping the back of his own neck. His ring is warm against his skin. Loki’s lips quirk up into a smile, and he motions for Tony to come closer even as he uncrosses his legs.

Tony situated himself between Loki’s thighs, hand moving from his own neck to Loki’s as he brings their lips together in a warm, comfortable kiss. Loki’s fingers stroke down his shoulders, over his ribs, to settle securely on his hips.

“Would you like to- mm- explain why you chose to show Unnur your finished armor before your own spouse?” Loki murmurs, as Tony kisses over his jaw. The stubble of a few days scrapes across Loki’s jaw, and the prince brings up one hand, tilting Tony’s face up with just one finger beneath his chin. “I’m waiting, dearheart.”

“You were busy,” Tony mumbles, turning his head to catch Loki’s fingers against his mouth, but his lover is a goddamn tease. He keeps his fingers just out of reach, a sharp, playful grin splitting his angular face at Tony’s disappointment.
“Then you should have waited. We really must work on your patience.”

“Oh yeah? Wanna share your idea with the class?”

“Perhaps later.” Loki kisses the corner of Tony’s mouth. “You’ll just have to be patient, won’t you.”

They neck like teenagers, all wandering hands and searching, gentle lips. It’s nice. Simple. They end up on the cot shoved into one corner, Tony laying out on top of Loki while the prince pets through his hair. They’re both fully-clothed, and Tony’s cheek rests on the prince’s firm chest. It feels- nice. To not need to leave. To just have- have Loki with him.

Even if Loki’s cryptic almost-promise still has him knotted up with curiosity. Even if Loki won’t let him do any more than kiss at the moment.

“Are you actually pissed about me going to see Unnur first, or are you just being a brat?” Tony mumbles eventually, prompting a huff of laughter from his partner.

“I will admit to being- jealous, at times,” Loki carefully allows. “But I would not expect you to abandon your friends in favor of me.”

There’s a hidden edge somewhere in those words, and Tony pushes himself up on his elbows, head tilted as he gazes down at his partner.

“You know I’m not gonna abandon you for anything, right?”

Loki cracks a smile, one of his hands sliding down to cup Tony’s cheek.

“I know. You promised.” Another brush of lips, and Loki sucks a kiss high on Tony’s throat. “What are your plans for next week?”

Admittedly, Tony might be a little distracted, but he thinks he responds well.

“A couple lessons with Elder. I was- was gonna- christ,” he hisses as cold fingers slip up his shirt to press against his stomach. “What the fuck happened to patience?”

Loki ignores him.

“Please postpone the lessons. We’ll be taking a trip next week. I’ve pinned down the location of a very rare astronomical occurrence.”

“Field trip?”

“If you wish to call it that, yes.”

“Yeah, sure. Let’s go on a field trip.”

Tony’s starting to lose himself in the exploratory fingers and the dedicated marking of his neck, but quick as a snake, Loki slithers out from under Tony and prances across the room.

“Oh fuck you, Lo,” Tony groans, looking up to glare at the prince. Loki’s teeth flash in another self-satisfied grin.

“Patience, Tony.”
So a visit to the prisoner who still may have a use! A wedding! A finished suit! An upcoming trip! So yeah, a lot happens in less than 5000 words. We're sort of in the in-between phase. Mercel's attempted coup counted as, like, the mid-season special. We're going to start working our way up to the season finale now, but it might be a little while depending on how much stuff I want to cram into the last half of this part.
Thirty Nine

Chapter Notes

A relatively short chapter, but I’ve been planning it for a while.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Elder isn’t particularly thrilled about Tony rescheduling. He bares his teeth and rumbles ominously, but eventually just settles down in his hoard. All the while, Tony receives a major stink-eye from two of the dragon’s eyes.

He thinks he’s fine, though. Elder seems to have developed something of a soft-spot for Tony.

With lessons rescheduled, Tony returns to Loki in a flash of blue light, and within the day they’re off. With the Bifrost shattered, they’re left to take what Loki calls ‘back doors’. Naturally, Tony could just zap them wherever they need to go, but Loki is insistent on keeping their destination a surprise.

So they end up in a boat. A flying boat. With a tent and supplies and such loaded into the boat, Loki steers them away from the edge of Asgard, towards the mountains. As far as everyone else knows, they’re taking a vacation in the mountains. As far as Loki knows, they’re locating some sort of secret portal. As far as Tony knows, Loki knows what he’s doing.

Tony pours them each a drink while Loki steers the boat- juice for Tony and wine for Loki. Somewhere along the way Tony realized he’d been dry for- fuck. For way fucking longer than he’s been in memory. He’s got the alcohol tolerance of an Aes now, but- well. Tony doesn’t particularly want-

If he starts drinking again, even recreationally, he’s afraid it might be that much easier to fall back on liquor as a crutch when things get bad again. And he has no illusions about that. He has at least two thousand years to look forward to, and life isn’t all sunshine and roses.

Tony shakes the thoughts away and hands the wine off to Loki, and his partner smiles, accepting the cup. Loki’s lips are stained red until he licks the wine away. Tony’s eyes follow Loki’s tongue with fond interest, and the prince smirks at him.

“How long do we have before we reach your jump point?” Tony asks, settling down against Loki’s side.

“An hour, perhaps. The point is located in a mountain spring, over that way.” He points towards the mountains in the distance. The lack of strong wind in the open boat is disconcerting, given the speed they’re zipping along at, but the light breeze is refreshing.

“In a spring?”

Loki hums into his wine.

“You will understand.”

A little over an hour later, Tony still doesn’t understand, but Loki has instructed him to tie down all
Tony still doesn’t understand as Loki angles the boat up, circling high over the clear spring—maybe twenty feet in diameter. He definitely doesn’t understand when Loki smirks and tells him to hold on.

The boat pauses high where the air is thin. Pauses, drifts... and falls.

“Loki, uh, Loki what are you doing?” Tony shouts over the roar of the wind. Whatever charm had kept them fairly enclosed earlier appears to be unable to handle a vertical nosedive.

“We must enter the portal at terminal velocity,” Loki bellows back, eyes fixed on the rapidly-approaching, really-quite-tiny body of shallow water. Tony keeps a white-knuckled grip on the railing.

“Are you fucking insane? We’ll break our necks!”

Loki’s teeth flash in a wicked grin.

“If it were easy, everyone would do it!”

There’s no more time for speech after that. Instead, there’s a wash of cold, a flare of black, and then they’re spat out horizontally, soaring over a rocky beach. Tony’s heart pounds in his chest, and he’s not quite sure he’d be able to let go of the railing even if he wanted to. His brain is trying to piece together what exactly just happened. There had been a seamless transition between entering the water and appearing back in the air, oriented completely differently. They aren’t even wet.

He turns around to stare at Loki with wide, wide eyes, and his husband cackles at the picture Tony presents.

“Did we die? Are we dead?” Tony demands, as Loki carefully begins slowing their vessel.

“Hardly. Welcome to Elera.”

The words are accompanied by a sweeping gesture, but Tony’s busy overcoming his shock and glaring at his partner.

“You could have fucking warned me.”

“Why spoil the surprise? Was the fall not exhilarating?”

“That’s one word for it, yeah.”

Tony will grudgingly admit that thinking back on the moment, those brief seconds in freefall without the suit to catch him were exciting as fuck. He’s not going to tell Loki that, though. Not at that exact moment, anyways. Later maybe, when they’re curled up together and he’s feeling a little more pliant.

They follow the line of the pebble-beach, weaving in and out of tall, flat-topped pillars and arches of wave-worn stone. To their right, a bare, slate-grey cliff juts up. To the left is the ocean. The air is warm and wet, and Tony watches the sunset through the stone pillars while he sulks at the bow of the boat.

Loki decides they’ve reached their final destination as the sun finally dips fully below the horizon. The boat settles gently next to a grassy patch atop one of the pillars, this one connected to the main cliff by a natural bridge. The pair of them stake the boat’s ties into the ground, and within the hour they’ve set up a tent and fire. Tony sits roasting a pair of rabbits on a spit while Loki peels some
sort of fleshy, sweet yellow fruit that reminds him of mango. There are herb-crusted bread rolls wrapped neatly in a bag, and a jug of tart juice waiting to be poured.

They eat in silence, always touching in some way or another, and Tony banks the fire before they settle down on blankets in their tent. With a wave of his hand, Loki renders the roof of the tent transparent, revealing the glittering expanse of stars above them.

The days pass slowly, honey-thick and honey-sweet. They rise with the sun and climb down their pillar of stone to splash in the water, though Tony refuses to submerge completely. Showers are one thing. Swimming is another. Having his head go under? Uh, no. No thank you. He’ll doggy-paddle like a pro, thank you very much.

The next day they explore one of the ocean-carved caves at low-tide, and the bioluminescent life clinging to the walls takes Tony’s breath away. That night, farther inland, they walk through scrubby trees and watch the planet’s analog to birds sing like frogs and flit through the branches. They forgo clothes after the first day, for the most part. No one’s present to judge them, and magic solves the problem of skin-protection.

“Hey babe,” Tony calls one evening, as Loki reclines on a blanket, a book resting on her stomach. Night is falling, and Tony’s been scrambling around in the grass for the past half-hour.

She glances up at him, one perfect eyebrow arched as if to silently say ‘yes?’ Tony grins and kneels beside her, his hands cupped loosely together. He opens them, and a flurry of golden glowing bugs flutter free. Loki laughs, delighted, and Tony brushes his knuckles over her cheek. Some of the glow-bugs land in her hair like jewels.

Her lips are warm and slightly chapped when they meet Tony’s. They’re just a bit more full in this form, but Tony likes them all the same. Loki’s hand wraps around the back of Tony’s neck, her perfect nails digging lightly into his skin as she pulls him close. Tony rests on his elbows, and they kiss- long and sweet and slow. The glow-bugs flit around them in the fading light, and Tony is content.

Things continue along in that same vein. They’re sickeningly sweet, but Tony- he’s happy. There’s nothing to worry about, no one to fear. It’s just Loki and him and the sea.

The crowning glory, though, comes on their second-to-last night. It’s the moment Loki’s been waiting for, apparently. The reason he dragged Tony out to this lonely planet.

They sit together and watch the blood-red sunset fade to purple twilight, then to black, starry night. Two moons glow silver above them, and Tony wraps himself and his partner together in a blanket. Loki’s fingers play through his hair, and he shushes Tony’s questions, directing him to watch the calm, star-dusted mirror of the ocean.

As the moons reach their zeniths, drops of light slide down from the inky sky. Shimmering iridescent, so pale as to be nearly white, they fall, one after the other. They move and shift and dance around each other as they plummet towards the sea, leaving comet-trails in their wakes, but Tony thinks there might be two dozen. Give or take.

They pour towards the ocean, but never touch. Instead, the lights fan out, skipping across the calm waters. Dancing over the waves. Tony watches with wide-eyed awe as some inexplicable mystery of the universe plays out before him. His fingers lace with Loki’s.

“What are those?” he whispers. Across the still water, joyful music like crystal chimes echoes.
“Those, my love, are stars.”

They twine together and burst apart like sparkling flames, like the aurora itself, like lightning in the clouds. The chimes peal like laughter.

“Stars?”

“Mmm. What we falsely call stars in the night sky are- we can liken them to eggs, I suppose. Once the star within has reached maturity, its nursery bursts in supernova. From the chaos comes a star. They never visit the same place twice, so it really is very difficult to catch sight of them, but it is thought that they band together in small constellations like this one and travel the universe.”

“Why are they dancing? Is that the word? Dancing?”

They crisscross over the ocean, leaving trails of fading light to mark their paths.

“No one really knows, but I suppose we all take interest in that which is dangerous. Submerging a star in water can kill it.”

One dashes along the coastline, and Tony leaves Loki’s side to crawl to the edge of their pillar. He peers down, watching as the shimmering, shapeless thing flows past. The sound of windchimes follows closely.

“They’re beautiful, Lo.”

He crosses his arms beneath his chin and gazes out upon the living lights, while Loki settles down beside him. The trickster’s hand smooths down his spine.

“Most will never see this in their lifetime. We will likely never see it again,” Loki purrs. “This is Elder’s price. The heart of one of these. An impossible price. You would burn, if you tried to kill one.”

“You brought me here to teach me a lesson?”

“No, my Tony. I brought you here to share a rare beauty.”

The stars join together again, forming a tight, spiraling column up into the sky. Tony cranes his neck to keep track of them until suddenly they scatter out and down in perfect, circling curves. They brush the water, spin once, and then suddenly, as rapidly and gracefully as they came, the stars depart. They glide back into the sky, taking with them their glowing light and windchime-voices, and the two lovers are left in the silver light of the moon, with nothing but the wind and waves to keep them company. Tony watches the sky they vanished into, while Loki leans down to kiss his temple.

Something clicks and shifts, in Tony. Something imperceptible. Something inexplicable. He can still see the stars when he closes his eyes, sees them dancing and darting and drifting. He can feel the wonder, the warmth, the love for this person beside him. Loki wanted to share this with him.

“Babe? I need to tell you something.”

He rolls onto his back and looks up at Loki. The prince leans over him tracing his fingers around the reactor casing.

“I’m listening.”
Tony scrubs a hand over his face.

“We’re pretty sure I’m not actually from the future. Just, you know, from another universe. Hel says she can see the past version of every soul that’s ever going to exist in Yggdrasil’s branches, and there’s no alternate version of me. I’m- I’m not really supposed to be here.”

Loki tilts his head, lips pursed thoughtfully, and he bends to press a kiss to the knot of scar tissue beneath the reactor.

“You’re here, though. That’s all that really matters, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know what brought me here in the first place. I’m- scared. I’m so scared, Lo. What if one day I wake up and I’m somewhere else? What if someday I’m gone, and I don’t get to see you again? I’d rather watch the world burn than forget about you.”

Every fiber of his being rebels against admitting he’s afraid. Fear is weakness, and Stark men are iron. But this is Loki, and Loki is safe. Always, always safe.

“You won’t forget me. And you certainly aren’t going anywhere. I forbid it.”

“Oh you forbid it, huh? I remember how well your last ‘forbiddance’ worked out.”

Loki smiles down at him, framed by the star-studded sky.

“This time I mean it.”

And just like that, the situation is diffused. They’re together. Two brilliant minds. They’ll figure something out.

“Although I’m not entirely pleased that you kept this from me.”

Tony winces.

“To be fair, you sort of had a lot going on at the time. I didn’t want to worry you.”

“Worry me next time, my pet. My husband. My Tony. Don’t hide your fears from me. You’ve been my tether. Let me be yours.”

Loki rests himself securely atop Tony, his back bowed so he can mouth around the reactor casing. Tony buries his fingers in Loki’s hair. He’s let it return to its natural curly state, without anyone but Tony to see.

They remain on their little isolated planet for a few more days, but real life calls.

They dress. They break camp. Tony helps Loki straighten his hair again, wipes the salt and sand from his skin. They share a kiss, and Tony rests his forehead against Loki’s while the taller person leans down to allow the touch.

“I’m in charge of transport this time,” Tony announces. Loki laughs at him.

“I would expect so. The portal doesn’t have a reverse.”

Tony rolls his eyes. Of course Loki would take them on a one-way-trip without telling him.

“You have a lot of faith in my abilities, considering how short a time I’ve been learning.”
“I place my faith in you, Tony.”

“Alright. Let’s tone it down, sweetheart. I might throw up.”

He presses another kiss to the corner of Loki’s mouth anyways, and that’s that. They haul their tent into the boat, scatter the stones surrounding their fire pit and fill sand into the depression. Leave no trace and all that. Loki mans the boat’s controls again, while Tony places his hands flat on the wood-like substance. He pushes out his awareness, swaddles the boat and it’s contents and passengers in a metaphysical bubble, and pulls. With a flash of reactor-blue, they return to mountains of Asgard. In the distance the shining golden city rises proudly.

Frigga asks them how their trip went while the ravens perch on her shoulders, and while Tony is happy to tell her exactly how awesome a week on an isolated planet with Loki is (though he skips over the nudity. That’s sort of private), he keeps the star-fall to himself. Thor goes back to dogging Tony to spar with him, suitless, to test the apple’s effects. Tony, naturally, makes his excuses and goes to shower. Bathing in the ocean is a little different from cleaning with fresh, running, heated water. He keeps the water out of his face, washes his face and neck with a cloth instead, and bounds out again fresh as a daisy. He’s managed to figure out how to use the more finicky shaving implements, and he while he keeps a little facial hair, it’s fuller, more connected and less complicated than he kept it on Earth. Still not enough to count as a full beard among the Asgardians, but that’s sort of the point, and it’s nice to choose how he looks. That Loki likes the rub of his trimmed facial hair is just a nice bonus.

Beard-burn is an attractive look on the prince.

Sleipnir whines about being excluded from the trip in the way of someone who knows they really are too old to whine effectively, and does it anyways just for the hell of it, but Loki just fixes his son’s hair, promises to bring him along next time, and sends him off to his tutors. Odin apparently didn’t arrange for Sleipnir’s education when he took Loki’s son from him, so they’re catching up on lost time now. Sleipnir drinks in knowledge like a sponge, and before too long, Tony find his partner’s child imposing on Tony’s workshop time.

They get along like a house on fire.

Tony loses count of the number of times Loki walks into find Sleipnir listening to Tony with wide-eyed curiosity as Tony explains Newtonian physics and the principles of torque on a simple, then complex system. While it’s obsolete on Asgard, Tony teaches Sleipnir about electricity, and how the repaired Mark III uses that energy form to function. He teaches Sleipnir about the atom and molecular models of matter, and compares what he learned growing up to what Sleipnir is in the process of learning. It’s awesome, and fascinating, and Tony should have known he’d bond with the kid- and really, Sleipnir isn’t even considered an adult by Asgardian standards yet- over science.

Weeks threaten to turn into months, and finally, at one of Tony’s biweekly lessons with Elder, he asks a question that’s been on his mind for a while.

“Why a star?”

Elder is currently in the process of guiding Tony through locating enchanted objects, to ‘increase his sensitivity’ or some such bullshit. Currently it amounts to Tony walking around the golden hoard and standing over what he thinks to be a spot where one such object is buried, and then being told whether or not he’s correct. Loki is having some parent-son bonding time with Sleipnir, so Tony is alone today.
The great dragon tilts his head, regarding Tony curiously.

“I mean, why is that the payment you want?” Tony clarified. “Loki took me to watch some falling stars over an ocean a few weeks ago, and I just- Why a star?”

Why do you ask now, young one? Elder counters.

“I hadn’t, uh, hadn’t thought of it before. It’s just- It seems like a weird thing for you to want. You seem to be the ‘gold and jewels’ type of dragon, not the ‘shiny light’ type.”

Elder chortles deep in his chest.

Firstly, do not assume when it comes to dragons. Most are not so tolerant of being placed in arbitrary categories. The dragon shifts, prompting a rain of gold to slide down the hill upon which his head rests. He rises, causing another shower of treasure, and stretches out. The cavern is large enough that the dragon’s enormous wingspan can open fully, and then Elder folds them up again, and sits on his haunches, tail curling around his ankles. More to your point- There are two reasons. Only one is relevant to you, and that is the only reason I shall share. What do you think of my treasure, Tony? What would you call it?

Tony rubs his hand over the back of his neck.

“Uh- It’s nice. Shiny. Probably worth more than even I can comprehend. I’d call it your hoard, right? Dragons hoard treasure.”

Elder’s eyes slide shut, and he lifts his chin proudly. When the violet eyes slide open again, all four seem to fixate on Tony.

Every dragon holds an affinity for fine things. Treasure, jewels, precious metals and fabrics. Things of value are coveted. But this is not my hoard. It is not my true hoard. For each dragon, the true hoard is unique. My mate was a hoarder of flora. The cave of life you have seen is what remains of their collection. My own true hoard is knowledge. Answers. Truth, and perception. And the heart of a star? Tony can feel the dragon’s sigh. Such a heart is a source of great power, but more importantly to me, it is the collection of everything that star has seen. Over billions and billions of years, how much must they have learned? Have you any idea how long I have dreamed to know what the stars themselves know? I know I have set to you an impossible task, but Tony Stark, the impossible is rarely ever so.

And doesn’t Tony know it? He survived an impossible wound- two of them in fact. He created an impossible element. He developed an impossible soul in JARVIS. He’s set to live impossibly longer than any human should.

He’s just not sure how to do the impossible and take the heart of something that will burn him to a crisp if he approaches it with the wrong intentions.

Elder seems content to wait, though, so he figures he has time.

Chapter End Notes

So to lay out some differences between this universe, Tony’s original universe, and the MCU (insofar as I can without giving spoilers).
Tony’s Universe: Asgard didn’t exist. The Infinity Stones didn’t exist. There were some forms of life outside of Earth, whole civilizations, but none like in the MCU, and none that cared about Earth in the slightest. HYDRA existed, but was an extremist sect of the Nazis (yeah. Imagine that. An extremist sect of an extremist genocidal government.) rather than the supernatural group it was in the MCU. Without the Tesseract to suck away Red Skull, Steve had to and managed to kill him, and when he put the plane down in the ice, he drowned. His body was never recovered. Bucky Barnes survived, but he always blamed Howard for Steve’s death. Peggy Carter wasn’t there to help build SHIELD, and without a pivotal founding member the organization never took root. Bucky befriended Jarvis, and while Howard due to his conflicts with Bucky kept Tony away from him, Jarvis thought Bucky would be a good influence on Tony and ensured the two could interact whenever possible. Tony grew up calling Bucky ‘Uncle Buck’. Bucky died peacefully in his sleep in the year 1991, but Tony wasn’t allowed to go to his funeral. In fact, Tony had been denied contact with Bucky since Jarvis’s death a year earlier. Howard died due to a drunken lab accident in 1993, and Maria had to be placed in an extended care home in 1995. She died in Thanos’s attack on Earth. The reason Thanos took a few years longer to get to Earth was that without a Tesseract, Thanos just wanted destruction to woo Death with. In regards to the other members of the Avengers, Clint stayed with the circus, and remained there until the end of the world. Natasha died when the German BND took out a HYDRA cell. Bruce developed aggressive lymphoma as a result of his experiments, and he died six months after his initial experiment. So basically Thor never existed, and everyone else died.

SSBS Universe: The Infinity Stones never existed. Mercel is of a race I made up, and she came from a planet in a far-away star system. She was one of twelve concubines for a minor king, but she was his favorite due to her ability to manipulate minds when given physical contact. Her king would send her to the bed of someone he wanted to persuade, ostensibly as a ‘gift’ for the person, and she would either manipulate the person’s thoughts and beliefs, or drive them mad, or plant the impulse in their head to do something like kill one of the king’s enemies or make a poorly-planned attack on the king’s life so he could lawfully take possession of the person’s property/land. Think of it like her being a touch telepath, but she can only send messages, not receive them. When Thanos conquered her planet and began slaughtering her people, she managed to find her way into his bed, but when she tried to manipulate him with her powers into letting her live and taking her as a mistress, he was immune, and very nearly killed her. He saw a use in her abilities, however, and took her with him. He cultivated a sense of intense loyalty in her, while training her as a spy, and sent her to help open Asgard for invasion. Asgard’s timeline is advanced in this compared to the MCU. Charlemagne is ruling the Holy Roman Empire at this time on Earth, for reference. As stated by Hel, there’s no version of Tony native to this universe. The reason he’s here instead of having died in his own universe is a very important plot point, so I’ll leave that unspoken for now.

When Thor was banished to Earth, he didn’t fall in love with a human chick. Instead, he came to respect human life due to the children of the extended family who took him in. Kids are ridiculously perceptive and understand more than what we often give them credit for. They asked Thor a lot of questions in the way kids do, and these questions forced Thor to think long and hard, while he was developing a fondness for them. Thor faced the destroyer to protect the kids and their family, and thus became ‘worthy’ of Mjolnir.
Also someone pointed out to me a while back that I said Natasha was in Iron Man 1, when in actuality she was in Iron Man 2. .... I know. I didn't think when writing that, but it's been like 2 years now, so I'm just going to roll with my mistake XD

If anyone wants me to explain Hel’s role further, I’ll gladly do so. Same with general questions about the universe. If I can tell you without spoiling things, I will.
Forty

Chapter Notes

In case you don't read my WinterIron works, I'm in the middle of Organic Chemistry condensed into a 2 month semester after failing it in a four-month semester last year. So yay. Hence the lack of updates despite it being summer.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony’s been technically immortal for almost two years by the time he manages to wrangle Loki to Jotunheim.

To be perfectly honest, Loki didn’t know this was the destination. Tony had told Loki to bundle up, that they were going somewhere cold, but otherwise Tony had kept the details of the trip a secret, much like Loki had done a few months prior. After all, bitter cold isn’t isolated to Jotunheim and Jotunheim alone. The universe is fucking huge.

But Loki isn’t really taking it too well.

“Take me home,” Loki hisses, fur-lined cloak flaring out as he turns sharply in the snow to stare Tony down. “Tony, I do not want to be here.”

They’re standing atop a deep, snow-covered glacier. The air is still and beyond cold, and the carved mountain city where Tony learned cold forging perhaps six miles away. Tony will zap them closer, but he didn’t want to force Loki right in among the frost giants right off the bat. No, instead he decided to force Loki to Jotunheim right off the bat.

“Baby, please-” Tony reaches out, tries to take Loki’s hand.

“Do not- Do not,” Loki snaps, striking his husband’s hand away. “Why would you bring me here?”

Loki seems so goddamn hurt and betrayed, and it squeezes at Tony’s fucking heart, but he squares his shoulders and lifts his chin.

“Cause I’ve got friends here, and I want you to meet them. Please.”

Loki shakes his head, his breaths coming in short little bursts. This time, when Tony reaches out Loki doesn’t move away. He pulls his partner in close, guiding Loki to rest his cheek on Tony’s shoulder. Tony strokes his fingers through Loki’s short hair, toying with the edges that curl slightly around his ears despite Loki’s best efforts with a straightener. He presses his lips to that smooth black hair.

“Just until sunset, babe. How about that? Can we compromise? Or do we need to have your mom glue our feet down until we talk like real live grown-ups again?”

A soundless laugh shivers through Loki’s chest, and when he lifts his head to look at Tony again, his eyes are rimmed red, though no tears have been shed.

“I believe we can masquerade as adults,” Loki replies thickly. “Until sunset. Then we leave.”
Tony… actually isn’t sure what he intends to accomplish here.

Bring Loki to Jotunheim.  
Convince Loki to stay  
???
Profit

He has about eleven hours before sunset, if he’s telling the time correctly. Eleven hours to do… something. Yeah. Something.

Something that starts with visiting Daulr- the Jotun who housed and taught Tony during his little cold-forging field trip. His grandmother, a deep-blue, boney woman with braided silver hair, is just as distant and dazed as Tony remembers her, but her milky pink eyes light up when he produces a flower from Dave’s garden. Ice crystals coat the blossom, preserving it in bitter-cold crystals, and Daulr helps her place the flower on her little shelf of gifts and treasures, positioned close to the fur-lined chair in which she spends her days. Loki remains silent- watching, always watching. There are introductions made, and stories exchanged, and food eaten. For the purpose of this visit, Tony maintains his ‘Tony Stark of Nowhere’ moniker, and Loki introduces himself as Silvertongue. Neither of them want this to turn into any sort of diplomatic incident.

As the weak summer suns arc up and over the midday point, the light shining off hard ice becomes blinding, and Daulr draws Tony into the forge. Daulr’s apprentice, a girl with skin like a robin’s egg, is nowhere to be found. She’s gone to help with the birth of her brother’s first child.

“The fisher, right? Am I remembering that correctly?”

Tony’s seen the monsters the Jotun’s fish for. Huge tentacled things with buttery, sweet meat. Nightmare fuel with rows upon rows upon rows of teeth, with blubber rendered for oil and skin cured for armor. To name a few.

“Yes, Tony Stark. The fisher.” Daulr’s patronizing amusement earns him a swift kick to the ankle, and the Jotun laughs, nudging Tony away with a push of a finger. “Come. Come, look.”

Daulr retrieves a small box of ice, and the inside is lined in soft, precious fur. Inside, a hoop of finely-worked metal as big around as a bottle of Chianti rests. One side is broader than the other, and Daulr takes it from the box, displaying the carefully-etched swooping lines through the metal.

“What is that?” Loki finally says- the first word he’s spoken in hours.

“Firsvathe,” Daulr explains. “A child’s first gift.” He turns it over, running his fingers along the wide edge. “The midwife will etch the child’s name here, on the outside. Tomorrow, a priest will mark the inside. We keep these through our lives. They are a promise of belonging, and of family. Before the Goddess we are one.” Daulr smiles. “I was asked to forge this one. Come, Tony Stark, Silvertongue. We have a child to visit.”

The fisher’s wife, Aurey, is still in labor when they arrive, a few hours before sundown. The home, hewn directly into an ice cliff, is filled with neighbors and family, but they all step aside when Daulr comes bearing his box. The fisher- easily fifteen feet tall, watches anxiously from a corner while his wife wails on their bed, but with another scream and urgent coaxing, a baby is born.

The little thing (bigger than a human or Asgardian infant, but still small compared to the adult Jotuns) cries almost instantly, but the stone-faced worry of the midwife and the look of anguish on the father’s face isn’t exactly- comforting.
Loki leans against Tony as Daulr presents the Firsvathe. The mother provides the name, the Midwife engraves the gift, and the hoop is shrunk with magic to fit as a bracelet around the child’s wrists. While family members tend to the exhausted mother, the midwife wraps the infant carefully and takes the child away, out the door.

Loki is after her instantly, like a dog after a scent.

“Hey, wait. Lo — love, hold on!” Tony calls softly, chasing along behind his husband. The midwife ducks into a room devoid of people, and Loki crowds after her. Tony follows suit, and then it’s just the four of them.

“What are you doing to the child,” Loki hisses, but the midwife pays his question no mind. Instead, she waves him closer and pushes him bodily to sit on the edge of a table. Loki quickly finds himself with an armful of face-down, squalling infant, and the black, knotted growth in the center of the infant’s back is painfully obvious. Loki stares at the child, whose skin is as smooth and unbroken as snow. The lines unique to each individual are nowhere to be found.

“Hold him,” the midwife commands. “If you want to force your way in here, make yourself useful.” She snaps her fingers at Tony. “You too. Come.”

To Tony, she hands a round pane of glassy ice, pulled from her satchel. Tony is directed to hold the ice over the black growth, and when the midwife activates it, the pane bathes the infant’s back in pale purple light.

The infant doesn’t show any signs of pain, despite the way the black growth splits beneath the midwife’s glowing fingers as she uses her healing magic to open the knot of tissue. It’s essentially a bubble of spinal fluid and cord— a spinal bifida— and with intense concentration and careful, precise motions, the midwife goes about easing the twisted cord back into the protection of its spine, and closing the gap in the vertebra. It’s fascinating and sickening to watch; Loki— whose finger is now being sucked on by an exhausted infant— wears an expression Tony can’t read.

When the baby’s skin is sealed over again, and the blood and birthing fluid is cleaned away, the midwife wraps the child in blankets and furs once more. This time, finally, the parents see their child, whole.

The sky is pitch black and dotted with stars outside the home, but Loki doesn’t press to leave. His eyes are hard, his mouth set into a thin line, and his gaze never leaves the infant. Now when the sleepy thing nurses for the first time, not when the child is passed from arm to arm, each gathered guest greeting the newborn, now when the father kisses his son’s bracelet.

Especially not when the newborn returns to the midwife’s hands, and she vanishes.

Loki wraps his fingers around Tony’s wrist and pulls him along as he hurries after the midwife. The familiar tingle of Loki’s magic dances over him, to keep them hidden from view.

“I knew it. I knew it,” the mage hisses.

“Knew what?”

“She means to dispose of the infant. For a defect which she healed!”

“What? No! Lo, that’s not—”

“Stark—” Oh hell, it’s back to ‘Stark’? “She secrets an infant from its home in the black of night, telling no one, and you think this is anything good?”
Tony tries. He *tries*, okay? He thinks he deserves an award for that, but Loki keeps shushing him, talking over him, until they’re at the steps of a temple set at the peak of the mountain-city. The midwife unwraps the infant, leaving his unmarked skin exposed to the biting air, and she sets him on a bed of blankets in a cradle carved from ice, as Loki approaches from behind. Tony has his fingers curled in Loki’s cloak, like some sort of restraint.

“How *dare* you,” Loki seethes, dropping the glamour around them. The midwife looks over her shoulder, and Tony isn’t exactly sure what Loki’s plan is, given that a) the midwife isn’t really doing anything wrong, and b) she’s fifteen feet tall. Loki is just over six feet. “You will *not* abandon that child. We will take him if nothing else.”

Tony wraps his arms around Loki, covering the god’s mouth with his hand.

“No one’s abandoning any child,” Tony hisses, but Loki bites the heel of his palm, and Tony yelps, but holds firm.

The midwife rolls her eyes, and turns back to arranging the infant.

“What would you know of our rites?” she dismisses. “You would steal away a son of Jotunheim? Deny him the Goddess’s first gaze?”

Loki wriggles out of Tony’s grasp like a snake, and strides up to lean over the ice cradle, bracing his hands on the firm edge.

“I would save him from freezing and dying in the cold,” he spits.

“We are born of snow and ice. Cold is not our enemy.”

“Then why do you leave him exposed?”

The midwife’s hands dwarf Loki’s as she pries him off the cradle and tugs him away. The giantess sits on bare ice, while Loki remains standing. Tony stands by his partner’s side again.

“So you see that? The moon?”

She points up to where a silver, dust-ringed moon shines over the ice-wrapped world.

“That is the one-eyed Lot. His sister is the Goddess, and her eyes burn in the day. She is the one who first gave life to this world, whose name we do not speak. Lot rules the night, and his sister the day.” She looks to the cradle, where the infant fusses before settling down, sucking on his unmarked fist. “We are born bare and smooth, and it is the Goddess’s gaze which welcomes us into life. She gives us our markings, and she brands us as her children. Sometimes a child will come from the womb already claimed, but more often than not, we are bare. Tomorrow when the suns rise, the Goddess will see her new child, and he will be welcomed into the world of the living. That is why he rests bare. Lot guards his sister’s children while they sleep, and so we have nothing to fear.”

“So he is to be alone?”

“Typically yes. The holy people of this temple would come if he cried, but otherwise the child would be left to Lot and his Sister for the night.” She shrugs. “But he was born with a damaged spine, and tonight I will stand sentinel to ensure he lives through to greet the Goddess.”

Loki mistrusts her words, mistrusts the whole damn situation, but the midwife doesn’t force him to leave, and Loki flutters back and forth, between Tony and the cradle, while the midwife herself
tracks the journey of the moon. Tony remains awake but silent, leaning against the frosty stone wall of the temple. If not for liberal magic-use, he’d probably be a Tonycycle. Loki just can’t pick a spot. His fingers brush Tony’s, before he’s back to pacing behind the stoic midwife, and then he’s staring down into the infant’s huge scarlet eyes. Wash, rinse repeat.

When the first ray of sunlight touches the mountaintop, Loki freezes. The first sun edges over the red horizon, and the second follows shortly after, and the temple glistens and glows, the morning light filling the ice and spilling over like a cup beneath a fountain. The infant burbles happily, and the midwife closes her eyes, basking in the light of day.

She retrieves the child- now covered in swooping, simple lines after a night in the cold- and wraps him in his blankets. A priest comes from temple, a small implement of ice in his hand, and he carves a sigil on the inside of the infant’s bracelet, and smooths a hand over the child’s forehead.

“Welcome to the world, little one,” he rasps.

There seems to be a permanent furrow in Loki’s brow, one that Tony lings to smooth away, but as the child is brought home, as a small, family celebration hits off- one that will last the morning- Loki dances away, just out of reach every time Tony tries to touch him. Which is- Good? Maybe? The departure time of ‘sundown’ has long since passed, but Loki isn’t talking to Tony, isn’t really doing more than prowling the edges of the rooms, watching like a hunting cat. The new mother croons to her child as the baby dozes nestled against her breast. Daulr acts as a bridge, letting Tony approach to stroke the infant’s chubby little hand.

He’s never really wanted kids. Once upon a time, he had entertained the thought. If he had kids, he could prove he was better than Howard. If he had kids, he could prove he wasn’t— that he wouldn’t hurt them- body, mind, or soul- just to exert some sort of twisted power.

But that’s not really a good reason to have kids. A child isn’t a tool to be used or a commodity to have. A child is a person, not a piece of evidence.

So yeah, he’s never really wanted kids, but he can’t deny the surge of warmth he feels when soft, stubby fingers wrap around his thumb. A small, genuine smile pricks at his lips, and he nods at the new parents.

“Congratulations,” he says quietly, before gently working his thumb free of the infant’s grasp. When he turns, he finds himself the sole recipient of Loki’s full focus, which is infinitely better than being ignored. He lifts his eyebrows, head tilting in an unspoken question. Loki’s green, green eyes flick to the small family behind Tony, and his tongue darts out to wet his lips, but he shakes his head sharply.

“Will you walk with me? Outside?”

The words are a question, but in Loki’s mouth they turn to an order. Tony falls into step beside his partner, and this time, when Tony reaches for Loki’s hand, the trickster doesn’t pull away.

Tony lets Loki choose the path, wandering through the mountain city as it wakes up, coming to life in the morning sunlight. The city is a marvel of engineering. Literally carved from the mountain’s bones, with roads that become tunnels that become roads again, and stair and bridges of ice, and spires reaching high to glisten in the sky, and and and. There’s so fucking much. Chunks of crumbled architecture, signs of a war long past, remain scattered, but the Frost Giants’ capital is amazing. Loki pulls Tony into a snowy, round courtyard, startling a flock of puffy white mammalian creatures out of the snowdrifts, and with a flash of green, the space is sealed- their own little slice of privacy.
Loki paces slowly, fingers slipping from Tony’s grasp. He tugs on his short, straight hair, teeth worrying at his bottom lip, while Tony waits. He doesn’t wait long, before Loki is pinning him with his eyes.

“Why did you say nothing, if you knew what I was?”

There is a special sort of vulnerability in Loki’s words. The kind wrapped up in shattered glass and barbed wire. The kind sealed away behind frosted stone. The sort that promises pain, if Tony reaches for it.

“Um.”

Tony draws a blank. Because why did he?

Did he even have any sort of good reason? He thinks so. It wasn’t his secret to reveal. But by the same stroke, Loki deserved to know. He deserved to know before it came to light in the worst possible way. Tony knows Loki found out just before Odin fell asleep, that no one really explained what was going on until after the whole Mercel threat was over, but beyond that, Loki hasn’t wanted to talk about it.

He had promised never to lie to Loki, never to abandon him. A lie of omission is sort of bending the rules, twisting things around in a moral grey area, but Loki has every right to be angry, every right to mistrust Tony for concealing something so important. But still, Loki trusts Tony. Without question. Unwavering.

“Your mom asked me to let her tell you,” he tries, but the excuse falls flat on his own ears. Tony sighs, runs his fingers through his hair. He looks Loki fully in the eyes. No hiding from this. Time to face the music.

But Loki doesn’t look- angry? He looks- he just looks-

Tired.

Those sharp green eyes are full of bone-deep, utterly consuming exhaustion. The kind that springs from a long, long laundry list of traumas.

And Tony’s added to that.

He tries again.

“I’m sorry, Loki. Fuck. I’m so, so sorry.”

“You should have come to me first. You, of all people, should not have kept this from me.”

“I know. I know, Loki. Baby. Sweetheart- I fucked up.”

He doesn’t- doesn’t try to offer an explanation. Doesn’t try to justify what he did. He tries to keep the self-loathing, the anger and shame at himself, tries to keep that out of his voice, because the farthest thing from what they need is for Loki to feel the need to comfort Tony.

“I’m sorry.”

There’s not much else to say.

Loki digs his thumb into the palm of his hand, rubbing slowly, methodically.
“Why did you bring me here? The truth, Tony. Please.”

“I told you the truth. Or, part of it. Daulr really is my friend, and I wanted you to meet him. It’s just- Loki, you hate yourself so much. Did you think I was just going to ignore you calling yourself a monster? I love you so much, and admittedly, this maybe wasn’t the best thought-through plan, but, uh- um. I had a point. I really did.” Tony frowns at himself. Something bitter and rancid curls up in his chest. God fucking damnit. He’s just allergic to heartfelt sincerity, isn’t he. “Look, I’m having a really hard time getting a read on you right now. How angry are you?”

“I’m not- angry,” Loki sighs. He looks up into the pale blue sky, the muscles of his jaw jumping as he clenches, and then looks back to Tony. “I’m not. I think I should be, but truly, I’m not.”

“Why? I mean, don’t get me wrong. I’m thrilled, honey. I’m so sorry, and I’m glad you aren’t angry, but you have every right to be. You know that, don’t you?”

“I do know. But you are the person I hold most dear. You are my pillar, my rock, my shelter. This- this concealment is easier to stomach from you, because you have never abandoned me. You have never left me to my fate. You have never caused me harm. You are my dearest heart.

“So no, I am not angry. But Tony- No more of these- these half lies. Not between us.”

“I didn’t lie,” Tony insists, but Loki is far from impressed.

“Omitting the truth is not often better than a lie. Promise me, beloved. I’m not angry, but I don’t know if I can go through that again.”

Loki holds out his hand, the palm reddened and bordering on raw from the obsessive rubbing, and Tony grasps it, pulls his partner in close, and stands up on the tips of his toes to kiss Loki’s forehead.

“I promise, okay? I won’t hurt you again.”

“Then I forgive you.” Loki’s free arm wraps around Tony, and together they stand, embraced, as one.

So things didn’t work out perfectly. Which is fine, because maybe things worked out for the best. Tony doesn’t understand Loki’s reasoning for not being angry, but he knows he’ll do his utmost to keep this promise. And maybe, just maybe, that short trip- one which will be repeated several times in the future- helped. Somehow. In some way.

Because there are times when they tangle together, lips roaming gently and hands clasped tight, that Loki’s skin will turn icy cold while blue spreads like ink on silk and eyes bleed red. The first time it happened, Tony had been absently petting through Loki’s straightened hair, otherwise focused on reading the manuscript in hand. The shift in temperature, the tenseness in Loki’s muscles, the wary resignation in the prince’s eyes- they all had Tony setting aside his tome, mapping out arcing lines with lips and fingers and murmured praise. Neither of them mentioned the glistening, unshed tears in Loki’s eyes, but that had marked a shift.

Never in public. No, never. That was a choice Loki made. But in private, sometimes. Loki would wordlessly shed the Aesir illusion, and Tony would take it into stride.

He hoped that whatever Loki was doing, it was helping him hate himself a little less.

Chapter End Notes
After a google search, I know Lot is a religious prophet, but it wasn’t my intention to make that a connection here. I was tempted to call the one-eyed moon god Loptr, but I decided against it and took out some letters to make Lot.

Also, the midwife here? Her mentor was the one who helped Laufey give birth (Laufey in mythology was Loki’s mom, and here I’m making him a trans man), and was the one who sat with Loki during the night, since everyone was worried that since he was so small he wouldn’t survive the night. She died trying to defend the temple against Asgardian soldiers. By the time Odin arrived and found Loki, the Holy People of the temple had been killed, as had the midwife, and so that’s why Odin assumed Loki had been abandoned. Odin’s men had killed everyone looking after Loki.

And to recap about that ‘leaving the kid out during the night’ custom: The Frost Giants of this story have two main deities, a sibling pair. Lot is the moon god, and his more powerful sister is just referred to as the Goddess, much like how people wouldn’t refer to Persephone by name since she was so powerful and potentially-terrifying. The moon is thought to be Lot’s one eye, and the two suns are thought to be the Goddess’s eyes. Kids are left outside their local temple when they’re born so that the Goddess can see them and claim them as hers, which is what the markings are. The Jotuns know the markings are actually physically a result of the child having been born and adjustments to being outside the womb, but it’s part of their religion, that the markings are the Goddess’s claim on them.

I'm coming at this whole 'concealing Loki's adoption/racial status' from the perspective of an abused, non-adopted adult. So my perspective on the matter is probably very different than the perspective of an abused adopted kid or adult, or a non-abused, adopted kid or adult. Which is fine, I think, but that's just an explanation for why I'm going about things the way I am. I'm personally more willing to look over a dear, trusted friend concealing something from me than my dad concealing something from me, and I tend to project onto Tony and Loki, so there's that. I had a really awesome conversation with someone (you know who you are) about it, and I'm really glad they brought their concerns to my attention.
You guys have been begging for Tony Pain, which I assure you, is in the works. But first, some more Loki Pain. Yes, I am cruel, and only the obstacle of Organic Chemistry has saved you. But I have a plan, I promise.

Also, we’re getting towards the end of this particular part of the series. I’ve only got five more major events planned after this chapter before we move into Part Two (This being Part One and ‘End of the World (as we know it)’ being the prologue). If there are any requests of things to explore, I can’t promise to include them, but I’ll take them into consideration.

Not long after that fateful trip to Jotunheim- a few months, if that- Loki experiences hope. Raw, burning hope. The kind that can erupt into relief and joy, and the kind that can leave a hollowed husk. It all depends on whether that hope is founded.

It’s just- Loki loves Sleipnir. Loves him all to pieces. Loves that weird little shapeshifter, even and especially when he’s a massive eight-legged horse running rampant in the palace. But sometimes he looks so sad.

And Tony knows why. They’ve talked about it. At length.

Sleipnir lives with them, and Hel keeps in contact with her crows. Jormungandr refuses to come to the surface when Loki and Tony try reaching out on Midgard, but they know he’s more or less fine, given the sheer number of sea serpent stories told by the humans. One of Loki’s children is with Hel, although Loki is still too ashamed by whatever circumstances he refuses to mention to go visit, and the other- a twin- is hidden so well and so deeply that no one is to ever find him. But Loki says he doesn’t have reason to believe that child- a boy, a man now, named Vali- is unwell. That just leaves Fenrir. A child at the time of his binding. Struck through the jaw by a sword and wrapped in chains, according to Loki.

But Loki doesn’t know where to find the boy.

Odin does. Or, he did.

He’s still as crazy as a bag of cats, with no sign of improvement.

It’s been an ongoing research project. Frigga has been pouring over Odi’s records; Loki has been interrogating anyone potentially involved in Fenrir’s imprisonment. Tony can’t do much, but he asks Elder. Elder doesn’t really know, not having been privy to Odin’s decision-making regarding the imprisonment of a preteen boy, but he narrows down the search to what seems most likely.

Elder points them towards a number of places, including a star system a ways away, and with the search area narrowed down, Loki and Frigga quickly locate exactly where Fenrir is supposed to be, cross-checking Elder’s list of guesses with physical records in the palace.

According to one of Odin’s log books, Fenrir is hidden away within a hollow moon orbiting an
inhospitable planet. So they scheme, and plan.

And it looks Like Tony’s going to be playing father to an infant after all.

The plan is for Loki to show herself as a woman, be seen and gossiped about. And then Tony and Loki vacation to Vanaheim for about a year. In the meantime, they’ll go retrieve Fenrir, and bring him to Frigga’s family, where Loki and Morgan will work on casting a true age regression spell. When they return to Asgard, it will be with an infant in tow- Loki’s and Tony’s son, as far as anyone else is concerned.

They’ll just need Fenrir to consent to the spell. If he doesn’t, they’ll work something else out.

It’s a good plan. A really good plan. One that scares Tony shitless, but he’ll deal, and he’ll be the best damn father he can be.

Frigga works things out with her family, while Loki flits from place to place as a woman. She’s self-conscious and anxious about the whole thing, because Asgard is cruel. Frigga may be in charge, but that hasn’t magically made everyone welcoming of trans folk. But it’s an essential part of the ruse. If Loki were really pregnant, she wouldn’t be able to slip back into her male skin.

They spend just long enough on Asgard, before Tony zaps them over to Vanaheim. The Bifrost is being slowly, slowly repaired, but it isn’t functional yet, so Tony’s skills are required to leave the realm.

Loki and Morgan spend another month working out the spell in the form of an enchanted potion-very Disney-esque. And then it’s showtime.

Loki is a bundle of nerves, but at the same time, he’s chomping at the bit to go save his son. He won’t- can’t- stop talking, rambling, worrying. Tony has to take Loki in hand, hold him close, calm him down.

“We’ll find him,” Tony soothes. “And we’ll bring him home. Okay? Relax.”

“He has been imprisoned for nearly three centuries, Tony,” Loki manages, face pressed to Tony’s shoulder. “And I have left him there. I did not come for him. What if he-”

“He’ll be so goddamn happy to see his dad, Lo. You’re going to get him now, and that’s what matters.”

Maybe, in hindsight, playing up Loki’s role in bringing Fenrir home was a bad idea.

They don’t know what the atmosphere of the moon is going to be like, so Loki wraps them up in a bubble of air, with a hovering crystal acting as a CO2 converter. They’re wrapped up, and Tony carries a bag of clothes and a blanket and medical supplies, and with a flash of blue, they’re gone.

There’s an issue, though. A really, really big issue.

For starters, they don’t land on this moon. They end up in empty space, with a dusky pink planet far below, and the stars high above. Tony manages to get them over to a chunk of debris, a piece of grey-green stone.

But there’s- well. There’s no moon.

Just a ring of dust and rock.
“No.”

It’s just one word. One simple, simple word.

No.

They search. Of course they do. Loki and Tony split off, each in their own little bubble, although Tony sticks closer and closer to Loki the more frantic the mage becomes. When Loki’s bubble flickers, his control of magic faltering with distress, Tony takes over, projects the bubble on his own.

Tears track down Loki’s face, but his jaw remains clenched, his eyes steely.

No.

They don’t give up. They traverse the entire ring, looking for something, anything.


So Tony does. Elder comes without a fuss, and Loki sits curled up on a chunk of rock, while Tony holds him close, pressing his lips to black hair. Elder returns not much later, his enormous wings stirring eddies of dust in the otherwise-smooth ring. Loki scrambles to his feet, unsteady and shaky, but he looks- he looks so goddamn hopeful.

Right up until Elder’s form ripples and shifts, into a more humanoid form- one with smooth skin speckled by glimmering scale patches, horns erupting from his ridged head, those four eyes glittering violet. Right up until Elder deposits scorched chains at his feet.

A beat of silence. There’s that word again.

“No. No. No no no!”

Loki backs away, foot skidding off the edge of the chunk of rock he’s standing on. Tony lunges forward to prevent Loki’s fall, but Loki jerks out of Tony’s grasp, and oh. Right. Magic. Loki stands in emptiness, eyes wide and uncomprehending as he stares at the chains.

“An asteroid,” Elder murmurs. “It would have been quick.”

“Look again.”

Loki’s voice breaks.

“Babe-”

“Look again!”

“There is no life here, nor on the planet below, nor in the space around us,” Elder rumbles.

“Liar! Odin- He was a child. Odin would have- he-”

Tony takes a step out into the void, into the pocket of emptiness created in the ring of debris. He takes another, and another, and this time, when he reaches out to Loki, the prince all but falls against him.

He pulls Loki close, cradling his partner’s head against his shoulder. Loki’s fingers dig into the
skin around the reactor as he gasps, soaking Tony’s shirt with salty tears.

“My boy,” Loki croaks. “I- he- I-

He devolves into hiccupping sobs, while Tony pets his hair. He meets Elder’s eyes, and the dragon bows out.

“My condolences, your highness,” the dragon rumbles like churning gravel, and like that in an instant, he’s gone again.

And they are alone. So utterly, painfully alone. With nothing but a shattered moon and scorched chains for company.

Nothing but that, and memories.

And Tony can’t do anything.

He hates problems he can’t fix. He hates pain he can’t soothe. He hates Odin, and any other fuck who locked away a young boy for the sake of differences and a prophecy that was never guaranteed to come true. He hates himself, for being one of the people to ramp up Loki’s hope, to remind him of everything that could be in the best of ways.

Loki’s fingers clutch at Tony’s shirt as he gasps wetly, weakly, his ragged breathing threatening to turn to hyperventilation. Tony does his best to keep Loki level, but his own eyes are damp too.

Fuck.

They return to Vanaheim, and at Loki’s request Tony keeps them hidden until they’re safely tucked away in their shared room. Loki’s grasp on his magic is tenuous at the moment. He doesn’t trust himself.

The pair of them curl together in the lamplit room. Loki’s eyes are dry and reddened, and he stares vacantly at the shadows. Night falls, morning comes, and Loki drifts asleep. Tony tucks Loki into bed and sits up beside him until he too dozes off, unable to fight the emotional and physical exhaustion.

Word is sent to Frigga, and Tony and Loki summon a doorway to Hel.

Tony stays mostly out of the way, letting Loki scream and cry and say his piece.

“How could you?” the prince screams, advancing on his daughter. “You are not cruel. My daughter is not cruel, so who are you?”

“Do not speak to me in that way,” Hel snaps back, a glittering tear arcing down her living cheek. “I wanted to tell you. I wanted to. Do you have any idea how hard it was? To save you, to heal you, to send you back, and know that someday, eventually, you would be broken yet again?” She bridges the gap between them, giving Loki no choice in how to respond as she wraps her arms around him, holds him close. Loki struggles, tries to break free of his daughter’s hold, but she remains adamant until he settles down, cautiously returns the embrace. “He was your son, but he is also my brother.”

“Why did you not tell me?”

“I wanted to tell you,” she whispers, resting her cheek on her father’s shoulder in the way of someone who really isn’t used to being touched at all. “But I can’t offer. I can only answer.”

All the while, a wolf prowls in the shadows, always hidden, never coming forward. Loki catches
sight of it at one point, but like smoke it vanishes and does not come back.

It’s a trip, a visit that Loki could have made alone, no question. Loki deserves privacy, deserves room to grieve.

But there’s a very real possibility that if Tony weren’t there, Loki wouldn’t bring himself to leave. And that scares Tony shitless.

Chapter End Notes

I am so incredibly pissed off. Two years ago I had this whole fucking thing outlined, but I was an idiot and apparently deleted the images of my hand-written outlines, and I can’t find the goddamn physical copies, so I’m pretty pissed about having lost that. I’m ready to start fine-tuning the timeline of Part 3, but the outline is MIA.

Also, just FYI since I didn't explicitly write it, Tony does get Loki to leave Helheim with him.
Forty Two

Chapter Notes

Prepare yourself for some emotional whiplash of the good kind. Very very different from the last chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s… hard.

It’s really fucking hard, and Tony’s not even the one coming to terms with the fact that another of his kids is dead.

Sleipnir is younger than Fenrir would have been. Never really knew either of his brothers, or his sister, or the two kids Loki doesn’t talk about from before everyone else. But he knows his father, and when Loki hurts, Sleipnir hurts in the way of a kid who doesn’t know how to help their parent.

Frigga hurts for seeing her son hurt. Thor hurts for his sibling’s pain. Tony hurts for his partner’s heartbreak.

Everybody hurts, but Loki most of all.

And there have been incidents. With knives, mainly. Tony walking in on Loki braced against the wall, tracing the tip of a dagger feather-light over his pale skin, not quite breaking skin. Holding the edge against the crook of his elbow. Eyes distant, dazed.

Tony hadn’t felt so fucking terrified since watching Obie swing Pepper into a wall.

That had been a few weeks after returning from Helheim. Loki wasn’t left alone for a long time after that.

There’s only so much a heart can take before it can’t beat anymore.

Tony wears the ring he made for Loki on a chain around his neck. There had been a discussion, Loki asking Tony to hold onto the ring for him for an undefined period of time. Tony isn’t used to being the stable party. He’s used to being the self-destructing, out of control, spiralling mess relying on friends and liquor to remain sane. He’s not- he isn’t familiar with being the one to hold onto the sharp things, being the one degree of separation between Loki and a pained impulse decision. It feels more real, this time. Somehow more real than cutting the wire, or breaking the chains.

Because while giving Tony the ring is a good symbol, Loki could easily procure any other method of hurting, or killing himself. He’s a fucking mage, for fuck’s sake.

But symbols are important. Symbols have weight. Symbols mean something.

Almost a quarter of a century later, Tony still has the ring, though things have settled down. The loss of a kid isn’t something you really recover from. But Loki is coming to terms. Slowly. It seems like ages to Tony, but he’s working on borrowed time anyways. He probably should have died a decade or so ago, but here he is. Strong, and full of youthful energy. He spars with Sleipnir, teases
the young man about his sweetheart apprenticed to a seamstress in the city. He and Loki take the
shapeshifter to meet Elder, to the center of a nebula, to a fucking skull-planet called Knowhere (and
yeah, that’s hilarious. Tony Stark of Nowhere. Loki and Sleipnir don’t get the joke, and Tony
chucks it up to the differences in Allspeak). Loki learns, and starts to take all his pain, and sorrow,
and emptiness, and transform it into determination. Determination to protect the family he has left.

He also turns it into compassion.

He comes to Tony one day, while Tony stands in his workshop, surrounded by suspended
components and displays of light as he fiddles with his latest project. Everything is set aside when
Loki comes in with an expression that could really mean anything. Loki says nothing, just shows
him a tony silver loop of metal.

“Mother kept it,” Loki says softly, running his thumb over the symbols inscribed on the outside of
the flat side. The inner part of the band is blank. The meaning of the word translates into Tony’s
mind, but Loki says nonetheless: “Loptr.”

They sit side-by-side on a cleared portion of Tony’s cluttered workbench, one of Tony’s arm
around Loki’s waist. They’ve been back to Jotunheim a few times- mainly Tony visiting his
friends, and Loki tagging along acting as though Tony had forcibly dragged or tricked him into
coming with him. Tony won’t call Loki out, but it’s pretty clear that his partner wants to see what
could have been, despite not wanting to admit it.

“I need to see them.” The words are soft, like stones dropping through still water in an empty
cavern. Loki swallows. “They don’t know what happened to me. I could be- anything. They have
no idea.”

The silver band fits over only two of Loki’s slender fingers, too small and fine to go any further.
Loki gazes at the tarnished metal, mesmerized. They sit in silence for a moment, Loki tracing back
and forth over the band. He turns to Tony, presses his lips to Tony’s forehead, and just breathes. In,
out. In, out. And then-

“I don’t even know who they are.” Loki holds the tiny bracelet up, watching how it catches the
light. “Or if they would recognize me. Odin never told anyone who he took me from, if he even
knew to begin with. I was told I was abandoned, that my birthright was to die. But what if I am to
the Jotuns what Fenrir was to me? Lost. Unreachable.” He closes his fingers around the tiny band
of metal, hiding it from view. “Unknown.”

Tony cards his finger through Loki’s short hair. It’s fairly long again, but still ruler-straight.


It’s another seven months before Loki gets the ball rolling to finding his other parents. By this
time, Loki’s wearing the shrapnel ring again. This is good, Tony thinks. Progress. Maybe.
Hopefully. Tony offers to help with the search, but Loki shuts him down, and Tony figures he
really ought not to step on his partner’s toes. Instead he focuses on his own business, on helping
Unnur expand her business, on bonding with Sleipnir, on learning and learning and learning
from Elder.

When Loki brings up the possibility of finding his Jotun family and letting them know their child’s
fate, all he has is the name of the temple where Odin found him, memorialized in a forgotten
battle-poem. It’s the temple located atop the mountain-palace, but that doesn’t really narrow things
down. Anyone in or around the palace could be Loki’s family.
“To Jotunheium!” Tony announces, punching a fist in the air. The tension is rolling off Loki in waves, and Tony just wants to cut through it. Sleipnir is fiddling with his cloak; the shapeshifter had somehow convinced his dad to let him tag along. Tony doesn’t know how. He wasn’t privy to that conversation. All he knows is that he, Loki, and Tony are all in Tony’s workshop, bundled up in fabric and fur to protect them from the icy cold. Obviously, the extra clothing isn’t quite so necessary for Loki, but it’s the thought that counts.

“I’ve never been to Jotunheim,” Sleipnir says, leaning against his father. Loki ruffles the kid’s springy hair.

“Then I suppose we should get going. Tony?”

Tony reaches within him, dipping into the wells of energy he feels thrumming in his chest. He’s progressed in leaps and bounds since those first disastrous attempts at teleporting a flower. He’s learned how to tap into the reactor as well as pulling on his own innate energy, and his reach extends and extends and extends.

But this is a familiar trip. A well-worn path. The Bifrost is repaired, but Tony prefers to travel under his own power.

He takes hold of his family, and pops away.

They emerge in the ice and snow, and Sleipnir flinches, holding his cloak tightly.

“Norns!” the shapeshifter exclaims, eyes wide.

“What? Did you think the cold was exaggerated?” Loki prods playfully, but his expression remains pensive. He brushes his fingers over the fur-lined pouch tied at his hip. The pouch holds his Firsvathe, newly polished and gleaming.

Sleipnir knows of his heritage. He knows that he is the son of a horse and a Jotun. The horse part, he doesn’t really care about, except for when he decides to galumph through the halls on eight legs. The Jotun part is new and novel, and that’s pretty much the whole reason why Sleipnir begged to tag along. That, and he wants to be there when his biological grandparents are revealed.

“No, I just- Hmph.”

Sleipnir pulls up the heavy hood to protect his face.

Loki leads the way, gingerly manipulating the Jotuns they pass by to ensure their eyes slide right past the three outsiders. They enter the city, and that’s a piece of cake. The more difficult thing is navigating the palace. The temple perched atop the palace carved into a solid mass of ice and stone could probably be easily reached by Tony’s string-pulling, but there’s so much old, old, old magic woven through the bones of the palace that Tony’s doesn’t dare interfere.

Loki, however, is a master of deception. He manages to sneak them all past guards, skirting around outside ledges and climbing stone walls. The task of evading detection is made easier, although more perilous, by their decision to remain outside, to scale the outside walls, rather than walk the halls inside.

When they reach the top, they are almost immediately confronted by a priestess brandishing a frosted spear. Her head is shaved smooth, the natural ridges darkened with ink.

It’s the first time Tony’s been recognized as Asgardian, which is- it’s cool, actually, but not really something he needs to focus on at the moment. The sun glints off the ice of the temple. Loki steps forwards, coming face to face with the business end of the spear, but he doesn’t flinch. Sleipnir’s hand finds Tony’s while they hang back, and Tony squeezes the youth’s hand in reassurance.

“We aren’t here to fight. I- we are only looking for information.” Loki removes the pouch from his hip, and loosens the drawstring. He taps the tiny silver band out into his palm, and the priestess’s eyes harden.

“What did you get that?” she hisses. It’s pretty damn obvious that she’s assuming the worst.

“It was found in Asgard’s vaults.” Not technically a lie. Not really the truth. “I need to find the family to whom it belongs.” A beat, a breath. “I know what happened to their child.”

Slowly, after a few moments’ consideration, the spear lowers. It folds away, shimmering in on itself to reform more like a pointed scepter. She twirls it around, and holds it by her side as she reaches out for the Firsvathe. On some unseen signal, two priests emerge from the temple to keep an eye on them while the priestess examines the tiny band. She holds the silver up to the light, circling her thumb and forefinger over the inscription. A flash of magic magnifies the tiny text, and abruptly, she looks up, scarlet eyes narrowed in fury.

She barks orders at a child that emerges from the temple, and the kid sprints off, down into the palace.

“Follow me.”

She spits the words like poisonous things.

The three holy-people escort Tony, Loki, and Sleipnir into the heart of the castle, descending stone-hewn stairs and down what can only be described as an unwalled elevator. They enter a long, narrow hall, lit entirely by heatless fire dancing in an unbroken trough on either side. The walls contain stone carvings, depicting scenery in ornate swooping lines like the markings and ridges on Jotun skin. Tony doesn’t really have the opportunity to gawk, though. The end of the tall, narrow hall opens through a door, into a massive room, one that reminds Tony that the palace is carved from the bones of a mountain and the blood of ice. The walls glow a faint, translucent blue, shedding ethereal light on the space.

They come to stand before a simple stone throne, completely devoid of ornamentation. It looks supremely uncomfortable, is Tony’s first thought. One other Jotun flanks each side of the throne, one markedly taller than the other, although the shorter of the two still definitely lives up to the moniker ‘giant’. The Jotun sitting ramrod straight in the throne tilts his head, but says nothing as the priestess steps forward, offering Loki’s Firsvathe for inspection.

Loki kneels, pulling his partner and son down with him, and Loki dutifully says, “Hail Laufey, King of Frost Giants. Hail Farbauti, consort of Loki. Hail prince of Jotunheim, Helblindi. I am-”

“I know who you are,” Laufey growls, closing his fist gingerly around the silver band. “Now tell me, Loki son of Odin. Why have you come bearing a stolen Firsvathe?”

Tony reaches out and rests his hand against Loki’s back. He feels Loki breathe steadily beneath the thick cloak, and lets his touch drop away when his partner stands.

“I am no son of Odin.” Loki looks up, meeting Laufey’s eyes. “I was found many years ago on the steps of a temple. I was told that I was abandoned. I was told-” A pause, a breath. “-I was told my
birthright was- to die.” Loki works his jaw, nails digging into his palm by his side. TOny aches to take Loki’s hand, to smooth out the crescent-marks biting his skin. “But now I know that is not true.”

The smaller Jotun, Helblindi, steps forward, and my fucking god is he pissed.

“You claim the blood of Jotunheim?” he spits, hand on the ice-blade sickle strapped to his hip. Farbauti places a hand on Laufey’s shoulder, and Laufey touches the hand, though his eyes never move from Loki. “What do you think to gain from this lie?”

Loki, to his credit, remains calm. He reaches up and unclasps his cloak. The plush green fabric hits the ground, and Loki- crazy son of a bitch- is wearing a sleeveless vest type of deal.

“I claim the blood of Jotunheim,” he agrees. Blue follows the path of Loki’s veins, spreading like ink across parchment. Grooves and swirls etch themselves into Loki’s skin, and his eyes bleed red. Laufey leans forwards, riveted. “But I don’t expect anything. I know intimately the pain of losing a child. I have lost two.” Loki has to pause again, taking a moment to steady himself, but he presses on. “Two more are out of reach. I know that pain. I’m looking for my parents. I know my mother,” Loki insists forcefully. “She is the one that raised me. But I seek the ones who made me, because they don’t know where I am. I seek the ones who made me, because I need to tell them I am happy, and safe, and loved. I need to let them know that if they have mourned me, they need mourn no longer.”

“You think we will believe this?” Helblindi scoffs, slamming a hand on the back of the throne. “Your lying tongue is famous throughout the Nine, trickster. You come bearing the spoils of a war past to torment-”

Helblindi silences himself when Laufey raises a hand, cutting him off.

“Come here,” Laufey commands, voice soft. He stands from his throne, and as Loki steps forward, Laufey meets him halfway. Helblindi stiffens as Laufey kneels, coming down closer to Loki’s level. He opens his hand, revealing the Firsvathe again. “Do you know what this says?”

Loki swallows, looking down at the silver band, then back up at Laufey.

“I do not. I don’t know your holy script.”

“It says- Loptr.” Laufey deposits the band back in Loki’s hands. He touches Loki’s chin with the tip of a finger, and slides it across Loki’s jaw, to brush the hair back from behind Loki’s ear, a fond, gentle look on his face. “My first pregnancy was difficult. There were times I thought I had lost my child, but I carried him to fullness. When he was born… He fit in the palm of my hand.” Loki looks as Laufey spreads his massive fingers. “I feared I would lose him anyways. But he was born strong, and marked. The Goddess placed a starburst behind his ear. A sign of her favor.” Loki touches the distinctive mark, eyes going wide as he puts two and two together. “I have never forgotten him.”

Laufey smiles, carefully cupping the back of Loki’s head.

“Loptr, I have never forgotten you.”

“What?”

It’s the moment Loki’s been waiting for, searching for, but Tony’s partner seems frozen, no pun intended.
Farbauti comes forwards as well to crouch down, and Loki lets Laufey tilt his head to the side, to show Farbauti the mark. It's apparently distinctive. Tony wouldn't be able to recognize it as significant, hasn't really paid it much mind, but it's apparently unique enough that Laufey can recognize his long-lost son.

This is obviously not how the priestess thought things would go, and her wide-eyed look of shock speaks volumes.

It's a tearful affair, which Tony really fucking wasn't expecting. He'd never, ever seen a Jotun cry. Hadn't known it was possible, given the sub-zero temperatures, but after the initial shock of the situation abates, Farbauti finds himself in tears while Laufey laughs at him, chiding him for crying at a reunion. Tony can't even begin to imagine what it's like, meeting your firstborn child after centuries apart. The royal pair are delighted to meet Sleipnir, and Sleipnir somehow manages to bashfully bask in the attention.

Helblindi isn't thrilled. He really- isn't. He watches from the sidelines, wary, mistrustful. Who the fuck is this interloper? Why are his parents fawning over him?

Loki makes the executive decision to spend the night. Then the next night. And the next. Sleipnir is fascinated by his uncle, follows Helblindi around like a puppy, much to the Jotun prince's consternation. That kid (not so much a kid anymore, whispers a little voice) is unbearably endearing, though, so somehow he manages to convince Helblindi to help him find a souvenir to bring back to the girl he's sweet on, a baker in the palace.

Laufey wants a feast, but Farbauti cautions him. As fucking fantastic as the reunion is, there's a minefield of politics before them. Tony, personally, would go skipping through that minefield and trust his luck to see him safely through, but the life-long princes and kings see things more strategically.

That doesn't stop Loki from keeping in contact, while things are sorted out. Loki studies the scrying mirror Tony possesses, the one given to him by Elder, until he can replicate the spell, and Loki uses one of his secret paths between worlds to bring his Jotun family the other half of the pair.

There are more visits, plenty more. At first, Tony is brought along as moral support. And then, as Loki grows more comfortable, he begins making the trips alone.

Around year three of these visits, Loki returns with Jotun ambassadors in tow, which- Yeah, it causes more than a little chaos in the golden palace. Frigga was given very little in way of warning, and so much for treading delicately. The ambassadors are unarmed, however, which seems to count for something. Frigga gathers herself together admirably, though the look she shoots Loki indicates that they will be having words later.

Thor isn't quite sure what to make of this. He's- happy, Tony thinks, that Loki's finding his own way, muddling through the lies and learning all the truths, but Thor shares the views of the public when it comes to Jotuns. The only exception in his eyes is Loki.

Kinda sucks, actually. But Rome wasn’t built in a day and all that.

Chapter End Notes
It felt kinda rushed to me, but oh well. It's being published.

Tony-hurt is coming up quick. Oh boy. Ooooh boy.

The final countdown to the grand finale has begun! Go ahead and subscribe to the series if you like it, so you don't miss the next part being published.
There’s a treaty in the works. Apparently Asgard and Jotunheim have been at war for over eight centuries, on paper. No official peace was negotiated. Odin simply withdrew his troops. It’s been nearly two decades since Loki first found that he was royalty on two entirely different planets. There are cultural exchange programs in their infancies, and Tony uses his influence to get Daulr what essentially amounts to a travel visa. He introduces the Jotun to Unnur immediately, but Unnur is slow to warm up to the visiting smith. Even good people have racial prejudices. Better people work past them. Unnur turns out to be one of the better people.

So it’s good. After those tense first weeks, his two smith friends get along like a house on fire, and Unnur becomes the builder of the first cold-forge in Asgard. There’s not a ton of fuel for fire and coals on Jotunheim- hence the need for cold-forging and ice-blades- but he and Tony brainstorm the possibility of an enchanted flame, with the sun’s rays charging the enchantment each day. They bring Loki in on the project, and Daulr returns home with a set of bespelled stones and a crystal charge plate.

Meanwhile, Tony’s lessons with Elder have- slowed in frequency. But to make up for that, when he does go to the dragon, he stays for weeks at a time, usually with Loki beside him. This is one such occasion.

Elder had seemed excited, which is- a big deal. In the decades Tony has known the dragon, he’s always been stoic and unflappable. So when Tony and Loki show up to find Elder already outside the cave, nearly vibrating with energy, he naturally wants to know what’s up.

There is a location in another galaxy at which a rare, extraordinary event will soon take place, the dragon explains.

Tony hasn’t ever been to another galaxy. Nor has Loki. This is Big News to them. Theoretically, Tony knows the importance of galaxies to the dragons. There are twelve subspecies of dragons, and each one can be found in a specific galaxy. They all know of each other, but Tony was under the impression that correspondence beyond the galaxy is energetically taxing, even for dragons, unless they do that portal thing. Elder, however, explains that the rules work differently around the moons of Kra-id- the birthplace of all dragons. That one of the Ancients of the Sunflower Galaxy sought Elder out, knowing him to be a hoarder of knowledge. That for the past seven years, Elder has been negotiating with the dragons of the Sunflower Galaxy for safe passage to witness the event.

The event, as it turns out, is an overlapping of dimensions.

“What, like universes colliding or something?” Tony presses.

Dimensions, Elder corrects. Two universes are two different trees. Two dimensions, however, are two echoes of the same tree. All the dimensions together form one universe, but they remain distinct. This overlap- It occurs perhaps once an eon.

So of course they go. How fucking awesome is this? An event that naturally happens maybe once in a billion years? If that?
(And quietly, in the depths of Tony’s own mind, he feels relief, that this is not an overlap of universes. He does not want to leave his spouse. He does not want to leave his family. He does not want to leave this life.)

They travel to Kra-id first. After billions of years of dragons traveling to and from their deity? Birthplace? Tony still isn’t clear on that. Anyways, after billions of years, well-worn paths through the cosmos are firmly established around Kra-id, rendering otherwise-impossible portal jumps between galaxies much more possible.

The planet they end up on- the location of this overlap- is hot and muggy. Little things looking like nickel-sized organisms mimicking da Vinci’s aerial screw flutter around them, and animals (?) that Tony probably wouldn’t be able to pick out as being alive scatter from the odd trio.

About a mile away, a wall of shimmering air shivers and undulates.

_That is the boundary to the anomaly, _Elder announces gleefully. _Do not leave my side. I can navigate the divide, but it is likely that you will find yourself lost if you wander. If you leave the divide and enter the other dimension, I do not know if you will ever be found._

“No pressure, though,” Tony mutters, but oh my god, he’s so fucking excited. What is this? Why does it happen? Tony wishes he had all the dragon senses. Elder’s like a walking, talking analysis tool. Tony envies him.

They pick their way across the jagged, toothy plain of mossy stone. Tony hears water, but can’t see a river or lake or anything.

“An underground river,” Loki says decisively, when Tony brings it up. Elder says nothing to the contrary, so Tony accepts Loki’s explanation at entirely possible. It would explain the moss and humidity. “There are subterranean caves beneath our feet as well. I wonder what life resides within.”

Neither of them suggest exploration. Caves… Caves have not been their friend.

The boundary is not so much a boundary as a gradient. Like salt- and freshwater meeting at the mouth of a river. There’s a layering, like two substances of differing densities occupying the same space in a direct violation of natural laws. And Tony understand what Elder meant when he called dimensions echoes.

The space they came from was barren- filled with jagged stone like a tumultuous ice floe. That’s still there. Overlaid, however, is a forest of curly violet tree-like things. Tony’s eyes can’t seem to focus, to figure out which one is real and which one is not.

“This is wild,” he breathes, watching as Elder lumbers through a copse of the curly tree things. Some of them, he phases right through. Others snap, phasing into physical tangibility at exactly the wrong moment. He hears an ear-splitting screech, and something bursts from one of the trees, bolting away. Tony doesn’t have a clue what is it, but it’s awesome.

The ground shudders beneath them.

“What was that?” Loki murmurs cautiously.

_Do not worry. The overlap is inherently unstable, but we have ample time before we must leave._

They trust Elder. Elder is _old_. He won’t give an exact age, but while he’s younger than the Ancient Ones, as far as Tony can tell, he’s lived longer than there’s been multicellular life on Earth.
So yeah. They trust Elder. And they explore. Loki ropes Tony into attempting to collect what they assume to be seeds from the curly trees when they phase fully into their plane, and when Elder shows interest, Tony’s partner agrees to turn over a portion of his bounty when they return to the dragon’s cave of flora.

For now, though, they’re engrossed in their exploration.

*Remain here,* Elder commands, shuffling his wings. He’s so fucking *big* that the ‘shuffling’ sound is more of a leathery rumble. *I will return shortly.* He fixes them in his big violet eyes. *Do. Not. Leave.*

“Yeah, we’ve got it. Don’t move or we could be lost forever,” Tony replies flippantly.

Tony and Loki are left to their own devices while Elder erupts upwards in all his silver and amethyst glory. The gems and precious metals crusting Elder’s softer underbelly glint in the light. Within moments, the dragon is wheeling in the sky, taking in the interdimensional anomaly from the air.

Loki cups Tony’s face, turns him towards himself. Those thin lips quirk up in a warm, inviting little slip of a smile that Tony knows very, very well. Tony leans up and kisses that dumb smile away.

They’ve been married for almost half a century now, and yeah. They’ve fought. They’re immortal, strong-headed genius-grade dumbasses. Of course they’ve fought. They’ve just also learned how to talk things out as well.

They’ve got a good thing going.

“Once in a billion years, huh?” Tony hums, grinning against Loki’s mouth.

“And here we are;” Loki agrees.

“I can’t believe any of this is real.”

“Shall I pinch you?”

“No, you fucker. Don’t you dare.”

Tony steals another kiss, running his fingers through Loki’s hair and drawing a disgruntled hmph from the prince, and then he takes a step away.

He looks around at his feet, eyes trying to make sense of the two overlaid landscapes, and crouches to swiftly pick up a rock from the other dimension. It’s small and unassuming, but Tony thinks Hel might like it. Come to think of it, he wonders how the whole multi-dimensional echo thing works with her realm. Does she tend the souls from every dimension? Or is there a different version of Helheim for every different dimension as well?

Food for thought. He tosses the rock in the air, and catches it again.

“For your daughter,” he explains when Loki gives him a questioning look.

They remain in the overlap for several hours. Elder returns before too long, and continues to escort them. He determines that a fruit-like growth on the curly trees is edible to Loki and Tony, and the pair share a bulbous purple fruit. It’s incredibly sour. Oh my god it’s sour. Like licking straight citric acid powder. Tony hates it.
Loki loves it.

Elder guides them back out of the divide when the tremors shaking the ground grow more frequent.

*We will watch the divide close from here,* he announces when they’re a good distance back into their own dimension. Tony clambers up onto one of the jagged boulders jutting upwards, while Loki remains below, on a shorter, flatter ledge.

“If you fall, don’t expect me to catch you,” Loki warns him playfully.

“I won’t fall,” Tony shoots back, knowing full well that Loki will 100% catch him if it comes to that.

Elder snorts, shaking his massive head.

*You squabble like nestlings,* he grumbles fondly.

“Yeah, well. You’re millions of years old, I think. We’re basically zygotes compared to you.”

Loki shudders at the concept of squabbling zygotes.

The ground trembles. The tremors are coming with greater frequency, though now that they’re outside the overlap, they’re less intense. Elder examines the mirage-like shivering of the boundary air.

*Not long now,* he muses. *I believe-*

The overlap snaps apart, buffeting them with a thunderclap of shattered air. Tony flinches from the overwhelming sound, eyes closing against the wave of dust and debris. He digs his fingers into the rock pillar, wind whipping in his hair. The whole event takes maybe ten seconds, and then everything is so, so quiet.

*Amazing,* Elder announces, as Tony blinks his eyes open. He licks his lips, grimacing at the sand now sticking to his tongue.

“I’ll assume you saw more than either of us,” Loki remarks drily.

*Without a doubt.*

“I hate sand,” is Tony’s glowing addition to the conversation. Loki looks up at him in disbelief at the sheer idiocy of his husband, but Tony simply blows him a kiss. A sandy, sandy kiss. He stands up, balancing on the tip of the pillar. “Hey babe, catch!”

He intends to leap downward and into his partner’s waiting arms. He does.

But an aftershock shakes through the plain. Maybe it’s a natural earthquake. Maybe it’s the underground caves settling and collapsing after the shockwave. Doesn’t really matter. What matters is that the pillar crumbles beneath Tony. He’s too surprised to so much as grasp at his magic, and Elder misses when he lunges to catch him. Tony goes down, and he goes down hard. The snap and guttural crack of stone fracturing and shifting overwhelms Tony, and pain blossoms like an ice pick through his temple, and in an instant he’s lost.

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“-up! Sir!”
Tony groans. He *hurts*, but JARVIS is insistent.

“Sir, I need you to give some indication that you hear me,” the AI presses. He’s no longer shouting, which is something to be grateful for, but Jesus.

“M’fine,” he mumbles. His head hurts like a bitch, and he feels like he’s got a boulder mashing against his chest, but otherwise, he’s fine.

Except—

Oh. That *is* a boulder.

“What—”

Oh god. Oh *god*. Oh fucking hell no. He blinks up into nothing, into darkness, and takes stock of his situation.

He’s on his back. Okay, that’s a thing. He’s on his back, pinned between a slab of stone and a floor of shattered pieces. The reactor is obscured by his vest, but a touch to JARVIS’s citrine conjures a yellow glow. He can hear the underground river too close by. He can’t- He can’t- He can’t grip his magic. It’s like—like—like closing his fist around water.

“Sir, please follow my instruction. Breathe in— and out. In— out.”

He tries. He *tries*, gulping down air like a drowning man. He tries, and JARVIS helps, and they get there. He can breathe. He’s fine.

Not fine. But— He’s not dead.

“Thanks,” he croaks, looking upward again. The only thing preventing the boulder from crushing Tony like an ant is another fractured pillar braced against the one on his chest. But he can’t— he doesn’t have wriggle room. He’s pinned. “What happened?”

“The cave system beneath you collapsed,” JARVIS explains quietly.

“Loki?”

JARVIS says nothing for a moment, then— “I do not know, sir.”

Tony closes his eyes. Loki’s fine. He was closer to Elder than Tony was. He’s fine. He’s gotta be.

“How far down are we?”

“I estimate between sixty and eighty feet.”

So far enough that a fall would have killed him, if he hadn’t eaten the apple. Good to know. Something hot and wet slides down his face like a tear, and he smells iron. Blood. Great.

He takes a breath. In, out.

In.

Out.

He tries to grasp at the strings again. How fucking convenient would it be to just teleport out of danger?
But something wet- this time cold- laps at his ankle. He flinches violently.

“What is that?”

He knows. He knows what that is.

“I believe- I believe that is water.”

Tony swallows.

He heaves, tries to push at the boulder on his chest. He _pushes_, and it shifts. It shifts down. His breath punches out of him in an agonizing huff, but the boulder stops just short of fracturing his sternum. He can’t breathe. He can, but not the way he should.

Somewhere to the side, a stone clatters to the ground.

“I would advise you to remain still,” JARVIS announces, and no. No no no. His baby boy shouldn’t ever sound _scared_.

“Sounds like a plan,” he wheezes.

Besides. There’s no- no- no proof that the water’s rising. Maybe he just suffered a harder blow to the head than he thought. Maybe he just didn’t notice the water at first.

Except- It rises. Slowly. So godawfully, painfully slowly. Licks at his heel, and ankle. His calf. He’s on a slight incline, thank god. He’s got a while longer before it covers his head. Not- not that there’s a guarantee it’s going to do that anyways.

Fuck. He and water are not friends.

“Talk to me, J.”

He sounds on the edge of hysterics. Is Loki looking for him? Is- Did Elder chalk him up as a lost cause?

“What shall I say?”

Tony’s jaw clenches. What- What does he want JARVIS to say? Anything. Anything at all. His fingers find the little silver egg in his hip pouch.

“The Old Astronomer. Um. Yeah.”

“Of course.”

JARVIS speaks. Because he’s good like that. Kind. Merciful. He speaks, and fills the cavern with his familiar voice while the water creeps higher, wetting the back of his knees. JARVIS picks the edited version, the version Tony logged when bastardizing the classic poem for his own purposes.

“Reach me down my Tycho Brahe- I would know him when we meet…”

He thumbs the silver of the egg, and closes his eyes. The tiny silver egg warms in his hand as he activates it. As JARVIS continues, Tony opens his eyes again, and watches the silver thread jut out into the citrine-lit darkness. The water laps as the sides of his thighs.

Is Loki even on the planet anymore? He knows his partner is up, and to the left. He doesn’t know how far.
“What, for us, the goddess Pleasure, with her meretricious wiles?”

He can’t breathe. The stone shifts, and piercing pain lances through his chest. Raw fear bubbles and twists behind the reactor, and JARVIS’s voice breaks for just a moment.

“I love you, J,” he says. “I do. I’m so proud of you.”

JARVIS doesn’t acknowledge him, simply pushes on.

“Though my soul may set in darkness, it will rise in perfect light; I have loved the stars too fiercely to be fearful of the night.”

Tony nestles the silver egg in the hollow of his throat, so that the thread is never, not once, out of his field of vision. He tries to call for his magic again. It’s there. It’s right there, but as the boulder shifts again, his sternum pops— the cartilage tearing— and at least one rib snaps, and Tony screams, and any hold he had on it is lost.

“And remember, ‘Patience, Patience,’ is the watchword of a sage, not to-day nor yet to-morrow can complete a perfect age. Sir, please.”

Air comes in shallow, rapid bursts as the water licks up his spine. The thread points straight up. Tony can’t speak. JARVIS goes on.

“I- I must say goodbye, my pupil, for I can no longer speak; Draw the curtain back for Venus— ere my vision grows too weak.” Another stone clatters down a slope, and reaches its resting place with a splash. Tony takes the silver egg again, and presses it to his wet lips in the mimicry of a kiss. “It is strange the pearly planet should look red as fiery Mars.” He touches the citrine. It’s warm. “I will search and find and navigate my way among the stars.”

Okay. Okay. He’s— He-

He-

He heaves up, digging his nails into the boulder as he pushes. And pushes. And pushes. He won’t— He can’t give up, alright? Even if— Even if he tastes blood, and he feels Mercel’s sword between his ribs again, that same white-hot piercing pain. He screams— he roars.

He fails.

But goddamn it, he doesn’t stop.

“You will be found,” JARVIS promises. “You will always be found.”

And-

And he-

The water— icy cold and smelling of dirt— has found his neck.

He hears a voice, over the gurgle of rising water. He hears a muffled growl. He hears—

Tony, we are coming.

There’s something a whole lot like relief that hits Tony to hear Elder, even inside his own head.

“Oh my god.”
Oh god. Like seeing Rhodey in the desert.

The water dips into his ears when light bursts into the collapsed cave. Amethyst claws dig through the rubble, while glittering green magic holds the stone in place. Tony could cry. Maybe he does cry, but he can’t breathe, and blood bubbles in his chest.

“Tony!”

*Loki.*

Elder- much smaller now than Tony’s ever seen him, and what’s up with that?—wriggles into the cavern, Loki hitching a ride on his elbow spike. The dragon takes hold of the boulder crushing Tony while Loki’s magic wraps him in a warm, protective blanket, and the pressure eases off his chest in an instant. He can breathe, but it *hurts.*

“Sir is suffering from broken ribs and most likely a punctured lung,” JARVIS announces as Elder tosses the boulder away. Loki’s at his side in an instant, and Tony stares up at him, eyes wide.

“H-hey babe,” he manages. Loki cups his face, his other hand glowing green as he hovers it over Tony’s chest. And then there’s another person there with them, and Tony’s so fucking confused, but those crystal violet eyes sure are distinctive.

It’s Elder in a humanoid body. Clawed fingers, a bone structure that is so painfully not human, but still human enough that Tony’s having trouble wrapping his mind around what exactly he’s seeing. The dragon’s hands join Loki’s, and within moments, he can *breathe.*

He gasps, coughing wetly when the agonizing pain vanishes, and Loki immediately changes course to drag him out of the water. Tony tries to get up himself, but Loki won’t let him. Instead, Loki guides him onto his hands and knees, rubbing his back as Tony coughs up blood. He’s been healed, apparently, but there’s still the mess of blood and phlegm that needs to come up.

“I don’t like caves,” he rasps pitifully, before spitting.

Loki lets out a shaky breath.

“I should have caught you.”

Elder crouches beside them, and takes Tony’s head in his hands. He turns Tony left and right, examining him closely, until Tony jerks, and heaves, and violently coughs up another dripping glob of blood. Elder and Loki help him turn over. Loki’s fingers pet through Tony’s hair.

Tony still can’t- can’t get a grip on his magic. It’s like- like trying to transport water with a sieve. He leans against Loki, and Elder takes them home.

He takes them directly to Asgard. Directly into the palace, which causes quite a stir. Elder hangs back, head held high, while Loki helps Tony to the infirmary. Tony trusts Loki’s healing capabilities, but Loki wants Eir to look over him anyways. Eir heals the gash on his head and proclaims him fit, but demands he rest. Uh, no problem there. Tony’s fucking exhausted.

By the time Eir releases him, Elder is gone, but Frigga is waiting for them in the infirmary doorway. She takes both Tony and Loki and crushes them in a hug. She presses a kiss to each of their heads.

“How do you fare?”
“Uh, alive. Traumatized, but definitely alive,” Tony mumbles.

“I am glad for one of those things.” Tony’s lips quirk in the tired ghost of a smile, and Frigga releases them. “The dragon has returned to their domain. I knew you had been taking lessons, but you failed to tell me this mysterious Elder is clan Fral.”

She chides them, but her voice is gentle.

“What?”

“Oh,” Loki murmurs. “I knew that sounded familiar.” He wraps an arm around Tony’s waist. “He is to dragons what Mother is to Asgardians.”

So yeah. Elder’s apparently king or whatever. Not king, because dragons aren’t organized in a society like Asgardians are, but Tony’s feeling too fuzzy to parse out exactly what this means. Loki takes pity on him, as does Frigga, and no more questions are asked. Loki transports them to their room. Tony- He’s muddy, and bloody, and the reactor casing is cracked, and there’s so much to do, but all he wants is to drop into bed and not come out. Loki coaxes him into the bathroom, and carefully cleans him with a rag. Tony can’t handle more water right now, and Loki, thank fuck, recognizes this.

Once they’re both clean, Tony gets his wish, and they end up in bed together.

“M’gonna warn you now that there might be nightmares,” Tony whispers, head on Loki’s chest.

Loki’s nimble fingers trace patterns over his back.

“I will not leave you,” Loki promises in return.

Tony closes his eyes.

“Why can’t I use magic? Why- I wanted- I wanted to use it. To get out from under the rock. I still can’t grab it.”

“Magic is a strange thing. It is not merely a matter of will, but of heart. Significant trauma can sometimes cause it to seize, or flare uncontrolled.” Loki sighs. “I know, it is distressing. It will return, don’t worry.”

“Fucking sucks,” Tony mumbles.

“I know.”

Sleep is a long, long time in coming. A long fucking time. But Loki remains content to play pillow, and Tony eventually drifts off.

Of course, he accidentally punches Loki in the face a few hours later when his partner tries to rouse him from one of the predicted nightmares. It’s a quick, easy matter to stem the bleeding nose, but Tony feels fucking awful.

“I should sleep somewhere else,” he mutters, guilt gnawing at him. “Fuck.”

“No, you should sleep here, with me,” Loki dismisses, cleaning the blood from his face. “You have never abandoned me. Why should I abandon you?”

Well let’s take a look at that, huh? Tony’s never abandoned Loki because Loki is a fucking amazing person who keeps being dealt a shitty hand. He’s the kind of person who deserves
someone in his corner.

Tony’s here by mistake. He probably should have died a few decades ago. Frigga says he’s a prince of Asgard, but Tony’s really not much more than a dumbass nothing playacting at greatness.

Loki holds him close anyways.

Holds him through the anxiety, and the self-doubt.

And Tony maybe, maybe, *maybe*-

Maybe appreciates it. Like a fish appreciates water. Or a bird the sky.

The sky.

Fuck, he hates caves.

Chapter End Notes

So. Tony pain. I’ve got something worse planned later, but here’s a little something for those of you who wanted to see him hurt XD

Guess who listened to the 127 Hours soundtrack on loop while writing? I particularly recommend the liberation songs.

Also! I’ll be doing NaNoWriMo, so expect updates to be few and far between until that's done. My goal will be 750 words a day for an original novel.
Forty Four

Chapter Notes

Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh. We're so fricking close to the end. Jumping around a little bit in this chapter, 'cause I'm trying to lay some groundwork for some later sections before we close out this part of the series, but I hope it's not too weirdly paced.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Sir?”

“Mm?”

Blinky perches on Tony’s shoulder, while Tony himself examines a holographic plan for an addition to the city’s shield. It’s been raised a few times, every decade or so for defensive training exercises, and Tony’s managed to get his hands on the mechanism’s innards. He’s been in contact with the shield’s engineers, and they’ll be going over Tony’s idea when he has a working model.

“I would like to discuss the events of three weeks ago.”

The delicate interface tool in Tony’s hand snaps.

“Yeah, I’d really rather not.”

To be perfectly honest, Tony really doesn’t want to think about that botched excursion.

JARVIS remains quiet for a moment, before he quietly says, “I believe I need to discuss it. I thought I was going to listen to you die.”

Tony breathes out. He breathes in, and out. Swallows thickly while Blinky pats at his face in concern. He hooks his hand around the monkey’s torso and deposits the creature down on the workbench. The projected designs flick off, and Tony clenches his fist, digging his nails into his palm.

“Okay, J. Whatever you need.”

There’s a moment of pause, and Tony fiddles with the vambrace housing JARVIS’s citrine.

“I have been functional for sixty eight years, three months, and four days. During this time, you have been my one constant. You are my creator, and my family, and my friend. I would not choose to be anywhere other than at your side, but at times I feel helpless. In the cave, I could do nothing but recite a poem, and I was- afraid.”

“I’m sorry,” Tony manages. “I’m really- I’m sorry.”

“There is no cause for you to be sorry. I merely- I wish to make a request.”

“Anything for you, J.”

“I would like a body. I do not wish to again be in a position where I can do nothing for you but
Tony’s mind spins. He’s still feeling- feeling sick, and cold, and hollow from the reminder of the watery cave, but this is something he can distract himself with.

“Okay. I think we can do that.” He holds out a hand and summons a tablet from across the room. It comes flying into his hand, and he props his hip against the workbench. “Okay. Cool. Alright. So I’m thinking a metal skeleton. I’ll ask around, see what works best. Um.” He taps the elegant stylus against the clear crystal pad, and watches as specks appear around him. It’s a device of his own invention, allowing two-dimensional drawing and words to be magically projected in a three-dimensional manner. Very similar to his lab on Earth. “I don’t- I don’t know what you’ll want to look like, so I’ll bring Loki in, see if we can work out a spell to let you decide your own appearance.”

It wouldn't be fair to lock JARVIS into one appearance for the next however many centuries when organic people can do things like grow out their hair or get a tattoo. Not when Tony could give JARVIS a little more adaptability.

“I would appreciate that, Sir.”

There’s emotion in JARVIS’s voice that Tony can’t quite identify. Emotion that Tony doesn’t have the mental fortitude to identify.

“Okay! So! Let’s do this thing.”

Tony brings Unnur to the palace, and Loki joins them. Frigga pops in from time to time to check on their progress, and to voice her own suggestions.

They settle on a vibranium skeleton, given its relative abundance on Asgard. Tony tried to coax Elder into giving up the lump of uru he has hidden somewhere in his hoard, but the dragon dismissed the idea. So vibranium.

The skeleton comes together bit by bit. Loki and Tony weave ligaments and tendons and cartilage and sinews and all the stretchy, twisty, cushiony bits out of Tony’s stash of living metal. They forgo things like organs, given JARVIS’s lack of need or desire for things like a digestive tract or lungs, and instead focus on muscle and structure. Finally, a layer of synthetic skin woven by Loki’s magic covers the body.

It’s taken two years to create an entire goddamn body. Nine months would have been more poetic, but it is what it is.

There’s an audience, when Tony prepares to activate the body. A small one. Loki and Sleipnir. They stay fairly out of the way while Tony takes a brand new arc reactor to the metal skeleton positioned face-up on his workbench.

The palladium reactor slots neatly into the body’s chest beneath its silver ribs, and the skin wraps itself around the frame and artificial muscle. The body is featureless, but JARVIS will be able to change that once he’s inside.

“Alright bud. You ready?”
“Without a doubt.”

Tony carefully pries the citrine from his vambrace. It’s heavy and warm in his palm, and with bated breath, he settles it in the center of the body’s chest.

It melds perfectly.

Pure moonstone eyes blink open, which is disconcerting for a moment before the irises bloom like sepia ink around black pupils. JARVIS tilts his hairless head, lifting a hand to examine his fingers. He ticks each one closed into a fist, then flexes them open again. He smiles.

“So?” Sleipnir prompts. JARVIS reaches out, and Tony helps him stand. He’s uncoordinated at first, still trying to figure out how all his nerves and muscles work, but Tony doesn’t mind supporting him. Loki provides an unbelievably soft robe, and JARVIS plucks at the sleeves in amazement once he has it on and tied.

“I must confess that I am overwhelmed,” JARVIS admits. “Physical sensation feels differently from how I anticipated.” He smooths an alabaster hand over his head, and watching the slowly-forming features on his face contort in a grimace is both really fucking weird and really fucking funny.

“What’s wrong?” Tony teases.

“I do not believe baldness suits me.”

“Vain already. Alright, move aside people. We need a mirror.”

Loki based the enchantment allowing JARVIS to choose his appearance on Sleipnir’s inherent shapeshifting ability, so Sleipnir steps up to the plate and does what he can to help JARVIS figure out what’s what. Which is- actually pretty goddamn hilarious, considering Sleipnir turns his hair cardinal red and convinces JARVIS to do the same to his newly-sprouted locks for a few moments. There’s an awkward, heart-wrenching moment when JARVIS takes his namesake’s form, before Tony assures him that JARVIS is his own person.

“You aren’t a replacement. You can and should be whoever you want to be.”

“This may be more difficult than expected.”

He settles on softer, rounder features. Full cheeks. An oval face. Thick eyebrows, which is surprising, but not bad. JARVIS touches his jaw with pale fingers, and after a moment’s thought he sprouts a small, shapely goatee- the same black as his fine hair. He chooses to keep the inhuman porcelain skin, rather than picking something with more life. He likes the reminder of his synthetic nature.

When JARVIS turns to Tony for approval, Tony can’t resist drawing his creation in for a tight hug. He’s tall. The petty bastard insisted on being an inch taller than Loki, which had Tony’s partner choking on laughter when JARVIS first made the request. He’s tall, and solid, and Tony feels something warm and indescribable bubbling inside him, threatening to spill over.

“It’s good to see you,” Tony manages while JARVIS attempts to navigate his first hug.

Loki touches his shoulder, then reaches up to cup JARVIS’s face. She smiles.

“Hello JARVIS,” she greets. “I think we ought to find you some clothes.”
Based on the dimensions of the crafted skeleton, they had a pretty good idea of what sizes to have on hand, but JARVIS will need things to be genuinely made for him now that’s he’s settled on a shape. The things they have now, though, will do for the moment. JARVIS dons the tunic and leggings, but not before he marvels at the texture of the embroidery and the clean, freshly-washed scent of the tunic’s soft wool. He very obviously doesn’t like the sensation of closed shoes, though he doesn’t say anything. Loki offers him buckled sandals anyways. They’ll work on the shoe thing later.

JARVIS looks at himself in front of the mirror again, and runs his fingers through his short hair. He lengthens it a bit. Then a little more, until it hangs in waves around his face, ending at his jawline. Apparently-satisfied, JARVIS can’t seem to stop playing with it.

“It is very-”

“Soft?” Sleipnir teases.

A bashful little smile finds its way onto JARVIS’s face. It looks sort of creepy, given JARVIS’s lack of practice in the act.

“Yes. I believe I enjoy softness.”

Introductions go pretty fucking well. Thor is wary but overall fascinated with JARVIS. He’s interacted with JARVIS-the-program on a few occasions, but having a physical body to go along with the voice is a new experience. Frigga welcomes JARVIS with open arms. Yet another son to adopt, judging by her warm expression.

There’s a strange sort of hollowness, though, and it takes Tony a few days to identify it.

He puts a name to the feeling when Loki brings them to some sort of trading center- a place built in the hollowed-out skull of something called a Celestial.

“Is this why people called me Tony Stark of Nowhere?” Tony asks, while they trail along behind Sleipnir and JARVIS through rows and rows of bolts of fabric and threat and ornamentation. JARVIS wants to learn how to knit. Go figure. Naturally, he wants soft yarn, and Loki says the softest yarn is Druidian helve wool. Naturally, only available at this questionable hub of intergalactic trade. Naturally.

“What?” Loki’s confusion is evident, but within moments his expression shifts to one of understanding. “Ah, they must sound similar in your language. No, to us, ‘Knowhere’ is simply a sound. It holds no meaning other than as the name of this place.”

“Really? Wait.” It hits Tony. “We aren’t speaking the same language. I mean, I knew that, but-fuck. It’s been like forty five years and I still can’t speak your language.”

Loki shrugs.

“The Allspeak allows us to communicate. Do not worry.”

“No, you’re going to teach me Asgardian. Or Jotun. Or whatever the fuck you like to speak in.”

“Here? Now?”

The amusement is clear in his partner’s expression, and Tony bumps against Loki.

“No, not now, smartass. Later. When we have time.”
His arm feels bare without the vambrace. Speaking of.

He glances ahead, seeking JARVIS and Sleipnir. But naturally, they’re nowhere to be found.

*Naturally.*

Anxiety sends Tony’s heart racing, and his fingers dig bruises into the skin of Loki’s arm.

“Where’d they go?”

“Peace, love. They’ll find their way back to us.”

“Loki, they could be *lost*. Or- I don’t know. Fuck. They could get *mugged*.”

“JARVIS is a highly-intelligent individual-”

“Who’s had a physical body for like three days now-”

“And Sleipnir can become a giant horse and crush an attacker’s skull. You have nothing to fear. And look. There they are.”

Tony follows Loki’s pointing finger down a side-path through the swaths of fabric, where JARVIS is now inspecting skeins of plush yarn. Sleipnir seems utterly bored, but the kid genuinely does seem to be making an effort to seem interested.

Tony leans heavily against Loki, a little dizzy from the sudden burst of anxiety. He feels something like emotional whiplash, not exactly sure what he’s feeling now.

Except the hollowness. He can identify the hollowness. And he has a name for it now.

Loneliness? Loss? He thinks it’s loss.

JARVIS settles on a color of yarn and loosens his pursestrings.

He doesn’t really need Tony anymore, huh.

Definitely loss.

JARVIS and Sleipnir return to them. JARVIS carries a frankly shockingly-large bag filled with yarn.

“Please feel this and give me your thoughts, Sir,” he requests. Tony manages a smile, and does as requested.

“Like feather-down,” he praises. “Do you want to keep looking?”

JARVIS considers this for a moment, but he shakes his head.

“No, I believe I have all I require. Shall we return?”

“Not quite yet,” Loki interjects. “I have an item of my own to procure.”

‘Item’ turns out to be ‘items’. As in, a case of liquor. Twelve cylindrical flasks like heavy clay thermoses. Loki makes the transaction and spirits the case away, and that’s that.

They do a little more exploring. Sleipnir buys street food for JARVIS to try, and it’s all sort of hit or miss, but fun to watch. Still, eventually they have to leave, and leave they do. Tony teleports
them home in a flash of blue.

The days go by, and turn into weeks. Frigga teaches JARVIS how to knit, but JARVIS?

Doesn’t really go far. Which is weird. Because now he has his own form, and he’s independent, and he doesn’t need Tony. But he still follows Tony like a lanky duckling, settles comfortably into a corner of Tony’s lab, interfaces with the armor when Tony flies. It’s like nothing has changed, and yet it has, because there JARVIS is, in the synthetic flesh, knitting squares for a blanket as he sits in his designated chair. He works very, very slowly, determined to make each stitch absolutely perfect. It’s endearing.

“Is that comfortable?” Tony says, as he sets up shop. All JARVIS requested was a chair. That’s it. A chair.

Those round brown eyes look across the room towards Tony. JARVIS gives the smile he’s been practicing. Still a little stilted, a little forced, but it’s genuine.

“I am happy where I am, Sir.”

“You sure?” He strokes his fingers along the spine of a foot-high silver-metal arch. It lights up warmly, ready for action. “Thought the point of all this was to give you more independence.”

The methodical click of polished bone knitting needles- a gift from Frigga- stills.

“The ‘point of all this’ was not independence, Sir. The point-” JARVIS takes a moment to pause and consider his words. “My purpose is to help you. That was the purpose you activated me with, and the time since then has given me ample opportunity to adjust my parameters. I have done so continuously. I was designed to be a learning program, and instead I became a person. What I have learned is that I want nothing more than to always remain beside you. I want to protect you, and help you, and give you company.” The knitting needles begin to move again. “I am happy where I am.”

Tony swallows thickly and rubs his thumb and forefinger against his eyes.

“That’s not-”

“Healthy?” JARVIS meets Tony’s eyes. “I am not human. Nor am I Asgardian, or Vanir, or any of the other races we have met. I am a construct. Your construct. I know my own parameters and protocols, and I assigned many of them myself. If I am to be given a choice, Sir, please do not dictate my options.”

And can Tony argue with that? Uh… Not really. Does he still feel like shit?

Oh yeah. Absolutely.

JARVIS has his own body now. His own legs to stand on, to walk on. There’s no real reason Tony can see that he should remain the center of JARVIS’s world, but whatever. JARVIS will figure it out eventually.

Except eventually doesn’t come. It doesn’t come, even after half a century of JARVIS having his own body. JARVIS still follows Tony like a massive duckling, and doesn’t seem unhappy about it at all. He gives Tony privacy, of course. JARVIS definitely understands that sitting in the corner of Tony’s bedroom while he and Loki fuck isn’t really a cool thing to do. But still, JARVIS is- there. Always there, when Tony needs him.
He’s also there when Tony accompanies the Council of Nobles down to Midgard. It’s a thing that they don’t, apparently, do often. Usually if someone wants to go say Hi to the vikings, they go on their own. But every now and then the whole pantheon goes down, just to see what’s what.

Tony gets to come too. Although he isn’t introduced as Tony. No way. Tony explains to Loki that Tony is short for Anthony, which is very much Roman, and Tony doesn’t want the vikings to worship the Romans.

“Trygve, then,” Loki decides.

Trygve, god of creation.

Tony can’t be accused of having an underdeveloped ego, but even he must admit that there’s a difference between being adored by fans, and worshipped as a god. It’s both awesome and strange, being asked to bless tools, tell stories, give favor. Word gets out about what exactly JARVIS is, and then there’s a whole hullabaloo about him as well.

It gets to be, um. It gets to be a little overwhelming.

Loki to the rescue, though.

They end up on a tropical island. Somewhere by balmy seas. Nowhere near the snowy landscape they had been on moments before. JARVIS agreed to remain with Frigga, so it’s just the two of them.

On a beach.

It would be sort of romantic. Just them and the starlight and the gentle roll of waves.

But Loki is more than a little distracted. He paces the edge of the water, his boots forming shallow prints on the hard, wet sand.

“I thought we could try to find Jormungandr,” he explains, when Tony makes a curious noise. “He-I feel his energy here. Near here. I doubt he will come, though. He never does.”

Ah. That’s- depressing.

Loki crouches and dips his hand in the water. A gentle green glow seeps out, rippling through the water like bioluminescent plankton. It races away, filling the water around them, and dims to nothing.


They wait. And wait. And wait. They wait until the moon sets and the sun peeks up over the horizon. And Jormungandr does not come. Loki doesn’t seem to expect anything different, but hope is a dangerous, painful thing sometimes.

Morning comes in all its fullness, and Loki scrubs a hand across his face.

“Let’s go home,” he murmurs.

Later, Loki will breeze into Tony’s workshop with Sleipnir in tow. Sleipnir will take JARVIS away, leaving Tony and Loki alone, and Loki will say:

“Sleipnir is the only child I have not betrayed. Fenrir is dead after decades of torture because I did not find him. Nari is dead because I was weak, and Vali will never trust me again. Hel, I never see.
I have left her so alone. I did too little for Jormungandr, and he was cast out, banished to loneliness. It is no wonder he would not wish to see me.”

And what can Tony say to that? Not much. Not much at all.

So he will gather Loki close, and press his lips to Loki’s hair, and hold him.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so confession. I’ve now got three ongoing works dividing my attention XD Four if you count the beauty and the beast AU I’m still working on.

Also, if you want a musical preview of the very last scene- and I’m talking at the very, very end of the series. The very end. Listen to Seglass Ni Tonday by Steve Jablonsky, from the Transformers: The Last Knight soundtrack. Listen to it with headphones, as loud as you can stand. I haven't watched that transformers movie, so I don't know what it corresponds to there, but I know exactly what it's going to correspond to at the end of this series.
Forty Five

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So the thing is, Tony’s little family isn’t exactly closed off from eachother. They talk. They laugh. They have meals together, and go on adventures, and learn from eachother.

Sleipnir still catches Tony and Loki off-guard when he announces his intention to propose to his girlfriend. Or, well, to ‘court’ her.

“I thought that’s what you’ve been doing for the last- what- Six decades? My fucking god, you’ve been dating her for six decades and now you finally decide you want to get serious?”

Sleipnir flushes darkly at Tony’s ribbing, but the kid gives Tony a toothy grin.

“We wanted to be sure.”

“There is nothing wrong with that,” Loki interjects. He pinches the skin of Tony’s arm in admonishment, and Tony flinches, scowling.

“That’s not what I meant, Lo, and you know it. I just- Fuck it. I’m going to stop talking.”

“Most likely for the best.”

Loki’s dry tones earn him a stern glare, but Tony’s partner simply smirks in response.

And so begins the courtship of Gudrun. Not that Tony thinks the courtship is really needed at this point. Gudrun’s mother approves; Loki and Tony approve; Gudrun and Sleipnir are apparently happy together. Sleipnir just wants to be ‘traditional’. Sure. Whatever floats his boat. Apparently what Tony and Loki had was a fucking whirlwind romance by Asgardian standards.

This involves poetry- which Gudrun endures with grace- gifts, assurances that Sleipnir can provide for her- as if that’s an issue with his grandmother being the fucking queen- things like that. Tony doesn’t get it, but he doesn’t have to. Sleipnir enjoys the gestures, as does Gudrun, and it’s sweet to watch.

Tony and Loki find themselves roped into helping from time to time, as Sleipnir’s parent and adoptive father. Mainly they help in acquiring items, or letting Sleipnir practice his poetry with them, or soothing nerves when Sleipnir finds himself more than a little unsettled.

For example. Sleipnir wants to present Gudrun with a bracelet, when he finally pops the question. Gold, set with black sapphires. Naturally, he comes to Tony for help.

Okay, he can do that. He can definitely do that. So he sits with Sleipnir for an hour, while Sleipnir plays with a projected design until he gets it just right. JARVIS provides his own input, which Sleipnir trustingly takes into account, and when Sleipnir considers it done, he takes the projected design, and presents it to Dave.

“What d’you think?”

The crow hops across the workbench and tilts her head this way and that, before looking Sleipnir dead in the eye and cawing raucously.
“I’ll take that as approval.”

Which just leaves the acquisition of materials.

Black sapphires aren’t really mined on Asgard. Sure, the royal family owns a few specimens, but those are already set in jewelry and sculpture, and despite Loki and Frigga’s assurances that they wouldn’t mind at all, Sleipnir doesn’t seem to want to pry gems from the treasures.

“Are you sure you do not need me to come?” Loki verifies yet again, as he smooths out Sleipnir’s shirt. Sleipnir takes his father’s hand, holding them within his own.

“Yes, I’m sure,” the shapeshifter soothes. “We’ll be back in a day.”

It isn’t that Sleipnir and Tony don’t want Loki to join them on their little gem hunt. Just- Loki is leading a project strengthening the wards around Asgard’s defenses. The actions of Merzel haven’t been forgotten- nor has the impending threat of her master. Loki’s task is an important one, and one he can’t really step away from without setting the project back.

“Worry not, Sir,” JARVIS adds. “I will keep you apprised of our progress.”

Loki’s eyes flick to JARVIS, and he nods.

“Thank you JARVIS.” He looks at his son again. “I will see you when you return. Be safe.”

“We’re going to Midgard, remember? Hardly a dangerous location.”

Tony could argue against that, but whatever. They’re going to Australia. Not exactly candyland in terms of wildlife, but they’ll be avoiding the people, so Tony supposes in the sense of ‘interpersonal confrontation’ sure, they’ll be safe.

And they’re prepared as well. Sleipnir, Tony, and JARVIS have been preparing for the trip for about a week now, so- yeah. They’re good. Everything is fine.

Tony takes Loki’s face between his hands, and strokes his thumbs across those sharp cheekbones.

“I love you, babe,” he murmurs, and Loki cocks an eyebrow, unimpressed.

“I know.”

“I should never have told you about Star Wars. Goddamn it, you really know how to ruin a moment.”

Loki grins.

“Shame you can’t show me the film.”

“Someday, Lo. Humanity’s gonna make it eventually.” Tony lets go. “Alright, see you later.”

“Hurry back.”

Dave flutters down from her perch to clamp onto Tony’s shoulder. Tony takes Sleipnir and JARVIS by the hand, and they all vanish in a flash of blue.

They arrive in the dusty grasslands. Someday the ground beneath them will be stripped away in layers, or tunneled into over time. All in search of the sapphires they’re after too.
At least they can search and retrieve the rock without breaking ground. Hooray for magic.

JARVIS passes Sleipnir what amounts to a Star Trek tricorder jammed into a compact mirror case, and the kid flicks it open and spins slowly in a circle, allowing the device to scan the surrounding area.

“I believe a deposit can be found not far from here.”

Tony waves a hand.

“You take the lead, Kid. It’s your engagement bracelet.”

Dave takes wing and circles in the air above them. She drops down every now and then to check on them, but for the most part she remains on the wing. The sun beats down on them in godawful, merciless waves, and the horizon shimmers. Sleipnir, however, knows exactly where he wants to go. Towards noon, Tony casts a shadowing spell over them to stave off sunstroke, because Sleipnir won’t back down and take a fucking rest. His persistence pays off, however, when the scanner gleams a gentle green in his palm.

“Here. JARVIS? Can you tell Father we’ll be home soon? I don’t think this should take long.”

JARVIS smiles and dips his head in agreement, and while he does as requested, Tony kneels with Sleipnir in the artificial shade. Before them runs a river- a small one, but a river nonetheless. Sleipnir insists he can find a sapphire in the silt bed.

“I’ll spot you,” Tony promises.

Sleipnir beams, and without a word, he shrinks. Into an otter. This might be the most adorable goddamn thing he’s ever seen Sleipnir shapeshift into. The otter scrambles into the water, and Tony is left to take off his shoes and wade into the water.

Over the next hour, Sleipnir returns to the surface twelve times, each time bearing a rough black stone. Tony accepts these rocks from those tiny otter paws.

“Please tell me you sent Loki a picture of his son as an otter,” Tony calls over his shoulder to JARVIS.

“I apologize sir, but my hands are currently occupied.”

And sure enough, when Tony twists around, JARVIS is sitting on his ass. Dave is tucked against one arm while JARVIS draws gargling purrs from her by rubbing circles over her head.

“Unbelievable. You’re such a pushover.”

“She is soft,” JARVIS explains.

Tony laughs, and looks back down as otter paws pat at him to turn over a thirteenth stone. “You almost done?”

Sleipnir shakes his head in a short, sharp gesture, and dives down into the water again.

Tony receives two more stones, before finally Sleipnir rises for the last time. He cuts through the water like an arrow.

Then several things happen almost simultaneously. Dave caws a throaty alarm call. JARVIS shouts. An eagle dives to the water, talons splayed and leading.
Sleipnir screeches as he’s plucked from the water, and Tony lunges forward to grab him, losing the collected stones in the process. He misses, falling instead into deeper water, but with a flash of blue he vaults himself to the bird. Catching an eagle mid-air isn’t something Tony’s ever thought he would need to do, but here he is. He wraps his arms around the furious bird, and all three of them plummet to the sandy riverbank. Tony twists to take the blunt of the fall, and the bird wriggles free as Tony lays there breathless from the impact. Sleipnir, however, has done some wriggling of his own, and he erupts back into his normal form.

From the shimmering noontime air, a figure emerges. Four more follow, and the eagle alites on the arm of the first. Tony rolls up to his knees, then to his feet, and he pushes Sleipnir behind himself.

The woman- the first one to appear- is beautiful in the way only a viper can be. The mass of black curls piled on her head tumbles around a golden crown, and the deep purple of her dress contrasts sharply with the washed-out sandy soil.

“You never do know when to leave well enough alone, do you,” she murmurs.

“Sir!”

Tony hears JARVIS shout from the other side of the river, but he doesn’t dare turn his back on the woman and her lackeys. This, however, is a fucking awful decision, because Sleipnir sucks in a startled breath as he’s yanked away, and when Tony spins to see what’s wrong, he’s met with Sleipnir’s wide eyes and uplifted chin, as a wicked black blade presses to the smooth expanse of his throat.

“Let him go.”

He doesn’t turn away from the burly man holding Sleipnir captive, but his words are most certainly directed at the woman.

“I don’t think I will. Reca? Bring me the brat.”

Tony’s eyes remain locked on Sleipnir as Reca walks him around towards the woman. Tony moves to follow, but she holds up a hand.

“You will remain where you are. Unless you would like to return home and tell the boy’s father you are the reason his son’s blood stains this soil.”

The rasping thud of Dave’s wings reaches Tony’s ear. She lands on Tony’s shoulder, and tilts her head to stare at the scene.

Ideally, Sleipnir would put on his hooves and kick the shit out of these bastards, but that knife. That knife. A thin line of blood drips down Sleipnir’s neck where the blade bites his skin. Tony isn’t confident that Sleipnir could escape before having his throat slit.

That isn’t something he’s willing to risk.

“His name is Sleipnir,” Tony ventures. That’s what you’re supposed to do in a hostage situation, right? Humanize the victim? “He’s set to be engaged soon. His dad—”

“I know who his father is,” she snaps. “Loki.” The word drips with venom. “The murderer of my beloved.”

The woman slinks towards Sleipnir, and she reaches out to run one finger across his cheek, then down his neck to swipe through the blood. She examines the scarlet liquid on her finger for a
moment, then tastes it. A beatific smile blooms on her face.

“Do you know how long I have awaited this moment?” she purrs. “I will cause that ergi so much pain.”

She casts a hand out to her side, and a sickly yellow-green light blossoms in the air. It circles out into a shining portal.

“No no no wait wait wait wait wait!” Tony rushes, holding his hands up. “He’s a kid. He’s just a kid.”

Okay, so there are six people in total. Plus a pet eagle. Sleipnir is powerless due to the threat of a knife at his throat. JARVIS is stuck on the other side of the river. Dave is like the size of a chicken. Could Tony take them out on his own? Maybe. If he uses his skills just so and finds himself extremely lucky. Is he going to risk his stepson’s life to find out if he succeeds?

No fucking way. No way.

“He is loved,” the woman growls. “Remain where you are Tony Stark of Nowhere. I have not yet decided whether his life is forfeit, but if you fight me, my choice will be made.”

“Your lover. Your lover, right? You want revenge. You want to take Loki’s son, since he took your lover.” Tony’s throat works as he swallows around a lump. “I’m Loki’s lover. Alright? Yeah? Wouldn’t that make sense? An eye for an eye? He took your lover, you take his. The kid doesn’t have any part in this.” Talking crazy ladies out of kidnapping isn’t Tony’s strong suit, but he’s desperate, alright? He’s desperate. “I won’t fight. I’m not a shapeshifter. Let him go, and take me.”

Something clicks.

Baldur.

Tony doesn’t know who this chick is, but he can’t think of anyone else Loki’s outright murdered. There are probably plenty of people murdered by Loki, given the god’s long life and proclivity for finding trouble, but Baldur is the one who comes to mind.

“He killed Baldur, right?” Bingo. Her teeth bare in a furious snarl, but she hasn’t gone through the portal yet, so Tony presses onward. “I got him out of his punishment. Remember? Or did you not know that? I’m the- the one who freed him.” His eyes flicks down to Sleipnir, then back to her again. “Let Sleipnir go.”

She’s considering his offer. He knows it. He feels it. She is. Tony opens his mouth to speak again, but a bolt of yellow-green light arcs through him, and Tony hits the ground, his muscles seizing. He twitches in the dirt, eyes unfocused, but he clearly feels hands on him. Vaguely hears Sleipnir shouting his name. Dimly sees the blurred form of his stepson running towards him.

And then they’re through the portal.

And he’s on his own.

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun DUUUUN
Who is this? This obscure Marvel character? What are her plans?

Stay tuned to find out.

This is for all you sadistic folks who begged me for more Tony Pain. Prepare.
Forty Six

Chapter Notes

Content warning for torture. Skip to the endnotes for a summary if you don't want to read it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony feels like he has one hand wrapped around a livewire. Which, to be honest, he’s done before. But that had been a minuscule voltage, and he’d done it just to know what it felt like. The sensation had been tingly, and numbing, and unpleasant, but not terrible.

So take that, and dial it up to twelve hundred.

Breath eludes him, and his muscles remain so tense that he’s honestly more than a little worried that a bone will snap. He vaguely registers being dragged across a smooth stone floor and down stairs. He’s stripped of his weapons and the majority of his clothing—left only in his leggings. Thick, banded cuffs wind around his wrists, and immediately everything seems muffled and warped.

His body unseizes, and he hits the ground hard. Tony gasps and braces his elbows against the grimy floor. Sweat beads on his temple, and sharp-nailed fingers dig into his hair, dragging him up onto his knees. He gazes up at the woman, and she regards him like a particularly unpleasant insect.

Tony refuses to speak, but then again, so does she. She simply watches him for a handful of moments. Without warning, her knee smashes into his nose, and sharp pain accompanies the crunch.

She leaves with blood on her skirt as Tony feels at his broken nose. Okay. One. Two-

He straightens the cartilage, but there’s nothing to clean up the blood, and god fucking dammit it hurts.

He’s had worse, though. He’ll probably have again it soon enough, anyways.

With aching muscles and a throbbing pain radiating across his face, Tony takes stock of his situation. Okay. So. He has pants. That’s good. That’s great. Pants are good. The cuffs on his wrist pinch the skin, so he needs to be careful about avoiding chafing. The room he’s in reminds him of-well. It’s essentially a grey box, with smooth walls and floors, and a single, thin slit of a window allowing one ray of light in through the otherwise-solid door. He can take four steps from one wall to the other, and when he runs his fingers over every inch of wall he can reach, he finds no seams.

The cuffs sit heavy, though. Like those weighted exercise bands. He finds no lock, and they’re a far sight narrower than the ones he was placed in all those years ago, when Odin first learned of his existence. The material seems to be some sort of burnished brass, and a seven-stranded braid of silver thread wraps around the center. Tony attempts to pry the silver thread away, but the moment his fingertips touch the material, they go completely and utterly numb. Okay, great. So much for that.
He doubts that the black-haired woman would leave him alone without securing his magic as well as his hands, but it doesn’t hurt to try.

Except it does. It really does.

He reaches for his magic. For the threads that will bring him home. For Loki. He reaches, and he burns. The threads of power elude him completely, as though they’ve been coated in oil and made insubstantial to boot, and the cuffs sear into his skin. He clenches his jaw hard enough that he worries a tooth might crack, and the rancid scent of burning flesh reaches his nose. The moment he gives up on his search for magic, the active burning ceases, but the damage done still lingers.

Okay, updated situation: broken, sluggishly-bleeding nose, and a pair of burnt wrists.

Tears gather at the corners of his eyes, but Stark men are Iron. Stark men don’t cry.

They come for him later. How much later? He doesn’t know. With no way to mark the passage of time, it slips by like smoke. He’s exhausted; that much he knows. Is it because hours have passed? Is it a result of the emotional upheaval of the day?

Yeah, he doesn’t know that either.

But they come for him.

“Can’t really say I enjoy the accommodations,” he chatters as demonic guards frog march him through gilded halls. Where Asgard is gold, this place is silver. Ugh. What is it with this obsession with precious metal? “Zero out of ten, would not recommend. Hey, d’you think-”

He earns himself a slap with a gauntlet-clad hand, and a split lip and welted cheek to boot. He grins, blood in his teeth.

“Well that wasn’t very nice.”

The guards push him through a doorway and into a- well. There’s no getting around it. It’s a torture chamber. A plain stone room filled with all sorts of goodies. Tony takes a fortifying breath.

And there she is. The bitch of the hour. She leans against one wall, gazing out the only window. A gentle breeze drifts through, bringing with it the cold, damp scent of lakewater and decaying leaf litter.
She pays him no mind as one guard shoves him over to a table, and holds him down against it. One hand digs in his hair, and the other keeps his arms crossed behind his back. With his face pressed to the rough, metallic-smelling wood, his field of vision fills with the wall to their left. The one harboring a wicked array of gleaming blades. Some serrated. Some smooth. All very unpleasant.

Okay, alright. He’s fine. For now. And JARVIS- JARVIS has the thingy to call home, and Loki will come for him, and-


A glass bowl of murky water clunks firmly to the table before his eyes, and Tony focuses on that.
Something shifts in the mire, and Tony swallows. He didn’t hear the woman cross the room, but those are definitely her nails shifting the hair away from his exposed ear. Her other hand smooths down his spine. Goosebumps lift on his skin.

“You are a fool, Tony,” she murmurs. “A brave one, but a fool. You trade your life for the halfbreed bastard of a foundling.

“And you’re a coward to go after that kid, so what a pair we make, huh?”

A small laugh escapes her.

“A coward? No. I am a hunter. Even the greatest of beasts will prey upon the young. The weak. The foolish.”

She dips her fingers into the murky water, and something thrashes. She pulls it out, and Tony can’t help but stare at the slimy thing. It’s like- like a fucking ceti eel. Or an armored slug. Ugh. His throat clicks as he swallows again.

“This, my dear friend, is the hurgorm. Native to the waters of my realm. Of particular interest to you is this: they feed on spinal fluid.” He feels the creature drop into his hair, and he jerks against the demonic guard pinning him down in an attempt to shake the thing off himself. The guard in turn tilts his head to grind his nose against the wood, and Tony bites his tongue hard enough to bleed in an attempt to swallow the sob threatening at his throat. “I have heard the process is excruciating.”

The hurgorm inches through his hair, leaving a cold, damp trail in its wake, and when it touches the shell of his ear, Tony shudders violently. It’s tiny, segmented legs sting like needles.

But that’s nothing compared to the sensation of the thing burrowing through his eardrum. Digesting the inner ear bones. Going deeper.

When Tony comes to, he’s on the floor, and the woman is crouching beside him, gently patting his face to rouse him.

“Really? All that from one little worm?”

He peers at her with salt-crusted eyes, trying to make sense of her words. Why they sound weird. Why they’re unbalanced.

His throat already feels raw, and he lifts a hand to touch his ear. Warm blood seeps sluggishly from the now-useless hole.

“I promise you, my friend. That was only the beginning.”

She gestures sharply, and the two guards heave Tony up to his feet. He makes the conscious decision not to help them in the least, instead letting himself be a deadweight, but that choice becomes rapidly less conscious as the sensation of nails-on-chalkboard-sound made tangible erupts in his head. That rapidly shifts to someone turning on a blender in his brain, which turns to-

“You’ll be wanting this.”

The woman forces a smooth, round stone between his teeth. It’s unwieldy and grating, but the moment it comes within a few inches of him, the pain mercifully ceases. He bites down to keep it in his mouth, but it’s a struggle. The thing was obviously not meant to be held.
“So long as you keep that charm near, your worm sleeps. Let go, and it will consume you. First your spine, and then- as your body fails you- your brain. How long this lasts is entirely up to you, my friend. How long will you make your precious Loki wait for your body?”

Tony sort of wishes he didn’t have the rock in his mouth. This is the point where the defiant captive spits upon his captor, right? At least, that’s what happens in movies.

This isn’t a movie.

A woven chain links between his cuffs, and that new braid is looped over a hook hanging from the ceiling. This forces him to stand on his toes, arms stretched painfully above him. The woman gives Tony’s right leg a kick, and fuck, she’s wearing steel-toed boots under that flowing purple dress of hers or something. He grunts and loses his footing. After a few moments of scrabbling around, he finds purchase again.

The woman’s lips quirk up, and she turns away in favor of walking to the collection of blades hanging on the wall. Tony watches silently as she selects one. With the ornate dagger in one hand, she takes a braced pole topped with a polished bowl with the other, and she brings both items with her as she returns. The stand settles on the floor with a muted click, and Tony glances down. Salt. Probably. Looks like salt. A lot of salt.

He closes his eyes for a moment. Turns inward. Prepares himself. The icy slice of splitting skin startles him, and he flinches away from the dagger carving a line between two of his ribs. His eyes snap open, and the woman beams.

“I thought I was meant to be the coward,” she chides, dipping her hand into the bowl of salt. He watches through narrowed eyes as white grains slip between her fingers. The harsh grind of coarse salt in his wound nearly succeeds in ripping a hoarse shout from his throat, and his body curves in an involuntary arch.

A pattern forms. Cut, salt. Cut, salt. Cut. Salt. Blood runs down Tony’s skin in lazy beads. She presses a handful of salt to the gaping wound in his ear, and he drops the stone. She presses it back between his lips, and he accepts it to end the agony burning him from the inside out.

She leaves when his body feels to be more cuts than skin. The sky outside the lone window has darkened from clear blue to starry black.

He wants to sleep. To curl up and cover his head and not move again for a long, long time.

He wants to burn this place to the ground.

He wants to sleep.

But mindful of the unwieldy stone in his mouth, he keeps his eyes open.

Morning comes, and his arms are completely numb. He feels like he’s inhaled pool water, and his skin feels as though he slept in a bed of coals. Bleary-eyed and shaking, he hears the door swing open behind him. Filed nails dig into an inflamed cut, and he groans.

“Good morning, my friend,” come the purred words in his one good ear. “I’m so delighted to see you still with me.”

At least- at least there’s no water. Look- look- look on the bright side, right?

Loki will come for him.
He shifts on his toes, tensing as she prowls around to stand before him. A long, metal wand with a handle of wood hangs casually from her hand.

Loki will come for him.

The wand whistles through the air.

Loki will-

His left knee cracks. Shatters. Caves in, and Tony shouts through clenched teeth. It’s a struggle not to outright scream. Tears leak down his cheeks, stinging the thin cuts there. He holds himself on one foot. The other hangs useless.

Sickly yellow-green magic dances around the tip of the wand, and Tony watches through his lashes as tendrils branch out and rearrange themselves, then warm to a cherry-red glow. He can’t stop the shaking. He wishes he could. Wishes he could take some of the satisfaction out of this. But he’s exhausted, and sleep-deprived, and in pain, and-

In, out. Deep breath. He’ll get through this.

Loki will come for him.

The newly-formed brand sears into the bruising skin of his broken knee, and when she follows up with yet more salt, Tony screams. This time, he does. The stone falls from between his teeth, but she catches it, places it back between Tony’s slack, trembling lips, and produces a scrap of cloth to tie around his head and keep the stone in place.

“I’d rather keep you for a little longer. I hope that’s alright.”

He loses count of the number of brands he bears by the time she grows bored and casts the wand aside. It hisses against damp flagstone, but Tony does not watch it go. His head hangs limply, chin against his chest. The woman traces a circle around the arc reactor.

“Is this important?” she asks brightly.

Tony kicks. He heaves up against the chain keeping him suspended and lashes out with his good leg. The woman easily steps to the side and catches his foot in one gloved hand. She grins viciously, and crowds closer to stroke her grabby fingers across the reactor casing.

He won’t die. Eir fixed that problem ages ago, and Loki now carries the shrapnel in a dagger. So he won’t- won’t die.

He still balks at the idea of the sadistic bitch finding a direct passage to his organs. Not that she couldn’t easily make one herself. But it’s- it’s the principle of the matter.

Her fingers close around the raised rim of the casing, but blue light flares. She jerks her hand away, smoke trailing up from her fingers, and Tony would honestly be pleased to no end, if he only knew what had happened. Because, uh, last he checked, using magic resulted in burnt wrists. And that sure did look a hell of a lot like his signature brand of reactor-blue magic. And if it’s always been capable of shocking people who touch it, why hasn’t it done so before?

The woman snarls wordlessly, and when her attempts at removing the reactor fail a second time, she consoles herself by popping Tony’s ankle from its socket. He chokes on the stone in his mouth, held in place by the scrap of fabric. With only his bound wrists now supporting his weight, it’s hard to breathe.
He dimly hears a messenger slip in, but he’ll be honest: he doesn’t have the energy to put words together. Black, flickering shadows dance around the borders of his vision.

And then he’s on the floor, and that’s so much worse.

He doesn’t black out. He whites out. His brain just- hits the pause button, unable to fully catalog the sudden influx of pain from his bruised shoulders, the breaking of old scabs and resultant salting of fresh wounds across his body, the agony of broken bones grinding together.

He whites out. End scene. Change set. He whites out.

Tony ends up in a heap on the floor of that first room- the one with the smooth walls and floor. The one he was in- oh hell. It was only yesterday, huh. For a while, he can’t bring himself to move. But the while passes, and he reaches out with trembling hands and drags himself across the floor. He props himself up with his back to the wall. Clothed as he is in only the tatters that remain of his leggings, the room is cold, and he shivers violently. He doesn’t dare spit out the stone, mainly because he doesn’t trust himself to be able to hold his hand up to keep it near his neck. He wants an intact spine.

The door swings silently open again, and Tony musters what strength he has to glare daggers at whoever comes in.

But in comes Loki. Loki, stripped of weapons and armor. Loki, wearing cuffs identical to Tony’s.

Loki.

The door remains open, and the woman looms in the doorway, but Loki is here, and Tony can’t tear his eyes away. He loses track of time, because between one moment and the next, Loki goes from frozen in the door to kneeling beside Tony and tenderly supporting his head.

“Tony- Tony, svass, I’m here.” Tony still can’t bring himself to spit out the stone, but Loki’s face twists in fury, and he glances over his shoulder as the woman speaks.

“Now that you’re here, I really have no need for your lover.”

“So let him go, Karnilla.”

Karnilla, then. God, what a bitch.

“But that wouldn’t be fun at all.” Her voice goes cold, like frost-shattered stone. “I want you to suffer, Loki. Suffer like I have. You took from me a good man. You snuffed out Asgard’s Sun. This is to be your reckoning.” She takes a step back, and grips the door’s handle. “Enjoy your time. It is now in short supply.”

And then they’re alone, in the dim, cold cell.

First thing’s first. Tony clumsily grabs Loki’s wrist. His fingers are still numb, but he does his best. Tony brings Loki’s hand up to his mouth, and Loki dutifully allows Tony to spit the stone into his hand.

“Don’t- That can’t go- go far,” Tony warns hoarsely. “She put somethin’ in my head.”

Comprehension dawns on Loki’s face, and the prince hastily rips off a section of his tunic. He forms a sling for the stone, then twists to tie it up in a pouch. Loki knots the makeshift necklace around Tony’s battered throat.
“That should suffice,” Loki murmurs. Tony lets his hands drop limply beside him again. He’s pretty fucking sure one of his shoulders isn’t quite put together the way it should be anymore. Loki’s hand- as icy cold as the room, but so much more welcome- cups the back of Tony’s head, and he gently- so fucking gently- rests their foreheads together. “I will present you with her head on a spit, svass. Mark my words. I will feed her corpse to my daughter’s crows. She will rot before Asgard, so that all may know of her treachery.”

“Hot,” Tony manages, making an earnest go at waggling his eyebrows, but that pulls on the scabs littering his face, so he gives up. Leans back. Lets Loki support him. “This might surprise you, but I feel like shit.”

“This may surprise you, but I can see that.” A moment of silence, and Loki adds, “I’m so, so very sorry, my love. You should not pay for my crimes.”

“Nothin’ t’be sorry ‘bout, babe. Not your fault she decided t’match self-defense with torture. Still think you made th’right call with that sack a’shit.” Loki says nothing for a while, so Tony prompts, “What’s the plan? Got a knife stashed anywhere? I could probably pick the lock.”

“I do not doubt you, svass. No, we are to await the signal.”

Cryptic as always.

“What signal?”

“It should be fairly obvious when it happens.” Bright green eyes narrow and razor-thin lips quirk up. “I went to Elder. He and others- Thor, his friends, and the like- should arrive shortly.” Loki pulls on a cord around his neck, and from beneath his tunic comes a familiar little charm. The panic button from all those years ago. “She never thinks to check the jewelry.”

“Have I ever said I love you? Because I do. I really do.”

“You may have said so on occasion. Come. This will be unpleasant, but you must stand.”

Easier said than done. There’s nothing Loki can do about the shattered, blood-dark knee at the moment, but he forces Tony’s ankle back into place. And then he does some sort of Vulcan nerve pinch bullshit to his thigh, and his lower leg and foot go completely numb.

“The fuck is that?” Tony hisses. “Where’d you learn that trick?”

“Here and there,” Loki dismisses airily, as he helps Tony stand on his now-numb, newly-straightened leg. The other- the one with the shattered knee- drags along the ground, but he can’t feel the pressure he’s putting on his fucked up ankle, so that’s a plus. Loki supports Tony, and they hobble over to the door. Loki reaches into his mouth, and from between his teeth and cheek he pulls- he pulls a lock-picking kit. A tiny one, but it enlarges as he shakes it out.

“I really do love you,” Tony swears again. Loki only grins.

They remain by the door. Loki keeps the lockpicks in hand, but doesn’t use them quite yet.

And then there’s a sound of steel-on-stone from somewhere far above them, muffled by layers and layers of silver and stone; that sound is quickly followed by another- the ungodly, layered roaring of some beast from hell.

“That will be our signal,” Loki mutters. He makes quick work of the lock- a horrendously complex thing made simple by whatever charms Loki keeps within the pick set- and leaves Tony propped
against the wall while he clears the hall.

When Loki retrieves Tony, the trickster helps Tony navigate his way around the three bodies on the floor. Walking is difficult. Tony uses Loki as a crutch and hobbles along, gritting his teeth against the screaming pain digging its claws into his nerves. Frightened bystanders—people Tony can only assume simply live in Karnilla’s domain—flee past them seeking refuge in the fortress’s lower levels.

“I could carry you,” Loki offers around the third time Tony stumbles and yelps.

He considers turning his partner down, but up ahead he sees stairs.

“Yeah, okay. Fine.” With permission granted, Tony rapidly finds himself cradled in Loki’s arms. He bites the meat of his palm to stifle the sound threatening to escape him, and Loki presses a kiss to his sweaty hair. “I f-feel like someone needs t’give me a glitter bikini.”

“What?” Loki’s utter bafflement draws a strained smile from Tony.

Seizing on the chance to distract himself, Tony elaborates.

“There were- there was this dumb sci-fi tr-trope. The dam-am-amsel in distress always wore lingerie.”

Loki darts into a side hall and waits silently for a pair of armored guards to sprint past. When the coast is clear, he says, “I’ll see if I can procure one for you then.”

“Make it green. I’ll match my hero.”

“Now you’re overdoing it, svass. Be wary, or I shall drop you.”

As if Tony believes Loki would do that. He shivers violently, and Loki simply holds him tighter.

Why is it so fucking cold? He could blame Loki’s Jotun nature, but that’s never been a problem before. He’s just- so cold. Like he’s been chilled from the inside out.

The present company is more pleasant to focus on. Despite their banter—which Tony readily acknowledges as a purposeful activity to distract himself—Loki covers plenty of ground. As they move, thunder shakes the solid stone foundation, and that horrible, tearing-metal roar reverberates through the halls. Furious shouting and the snapping of electricity come from an archway ahead, and quickens his pace. The uptick in speed jostles Tony, and he drops his head against Loki’s shoulder as a pained whine rips at his throat.

Loki whistles sharply, and the noise pierces through the din of combat echoing around the sweeping vaulted ceilings of the main hall. Tony squeezes his eyes shut, entirely trusting that Loki will keep him safe. The sounds threaten to overwhelm him again, to send him back into that overstimulated white territory. The thunderous, sparkling clatter of hooves stabs at his ear, but hand to god, Tony loves the sound. He’s not exactly aware of any other eight-hooved horse.

“M’so fucking glad he’s okay,” Tony slurs. And okay, yeah. There it is. Shock, at its finest. A little late to the party, in his opinion, but whatever.

“This will hurt, love, and I cannot say it will be dignified, but Sleipnir will protect you. I must go procure for you a head.”

Loki heaves Tony over Sleipnir’s back, and Tony yelps—digs his fingers into the thick mane—gasp against his arm.
Tony slits his bruised eyes open just enough to watch as Loki flicks his ring into its shrapnel-studded dagger—and right, ‘she never checks the jewelry’. Loki strokes his fingers through Tony’s blood-matted hair once more, and then jumps into the fray.

Sleipnir bolts off like a greyhound, and Tony feels like he’s going to vomit. He clings as tightly as he can to the thick mane as his stepson carries him to the crushed doors promising freedom. At least—at least—what? What was he thinking? Everything feels fogged-over and dull.

Oh. Right. At least Sleipnir’s gait is smoother than every other godforsaken hellbeast of a horse Tony’s had the misfortune of riding. They burst through the remnants of massive, ornate doors as the wall comes down around them. Amethyst claws rip at the fortress, and Sleipnir skids across weathered-smooth to avoid both—both—Elder. To avoid the amethyst claws belonging to Elder. Sleipnir skids.

But he rights himself, and Tony remains atop him.

Things get fuzzier after that. Tony knows they run into JARVIS. Knows his construct pulls his deadweight off of Sleipnir’s back and lays him gently down on what he assumes to be safe ground. His eyes won’t quite focus. He isn’t dying; no, that feels different. He’s—drifting. Not there. If the body isn’t his, the wounds can’t hurt.

“She certainly did not waste any time,” JARVIS comments, his tone darker than Tony can recall.

“Yeah. Eager beaver,” he manages, and JARVIS smooths a hand over his forehead.

“Hush. You are safe now, sir.”

“Heimdall!” calls a voice— he distantly recognizes it as Sleipnir’s. “Bring us home!”

He doesn’t quite pass out. He wishes he had, though. Traveling the Bifrost after essentially losing a fight with a salty, red-hot lawnmower is— he wouldn’t recommend it. Honestly, he wouldn’t. But Eir is there waiting with a levitating cot and a host of nurses besides. Words are slippery things, but he manages to tell her the same thing he told Loki.

“She put somethin’ in my head. Worm.”

He trusts that Eir can figure things out from there. Or, he hopes she can.

He really does like his spine intact, thank you.

“I am going to place you in a deep slumber, now,” she briskly says. “Relax. Don’t fight me. I’m going to help you.”

Eir works quickly, and finally—

Nothing hurts.

Chapter End Notes

I am... I don’t know why, but I’m more self-conscious about this chapter than usual. Maybe it’s the content. I don’t know.
I think it’s worth mentioning that I really do love Karnilla, and I have a huge lesbian crush on her, but I needed a villain for this minor arc, and the moment I remembered she was Baldur’s lover, I was like: Her. That one.

So! Summary. Tony is taken to a province of Asgard-the-realm, called Nornheim. It is called this because echoes of the threads the Norns use to weave the tapestries of time wash up on the lake shore once the history they stood for has been forgotten by every living soul. These threads can bind any force, and so are always incorporated into Asgardian confinements like handcuffs and that memorable muzzle from the Avengers. Tony ends up with a snazzy new pair of magic-binding cuffs, and is tortured extensively by the woman. She had planned on doing the same to Sleipnir, but Tony traded himself, so here we are. In the process, she uses a creature I blatantly stole and repurposed from Star Trek. Remember the ceti eel? Think that, but with less mind control. It feeds on the nervous system. It destroys Tony’s ear, so now he’s deaf in one ear, and it’s kept sedated with an artifact that emits a frequency that only the creature hears so that Karnilla can ‘toy’ (let’s euphemistically call it ‘toy’) with Tony for a while longer.

So then Loki shows up, and tries to trade himself for Tony. We learn the lady is Karnilla. Karnilla says nope, she has her prize- Loki- and now she’s free to kill Tony. Loki, however, cleverly hid that ‘panic button’ charm (remember that from the very beginning?) on his person, and disguised it as part of his clothing. When Karnilla isn’t looking, he presses that to let everyone know he has Tony, and then all hell breaks loose. Elder, Thor, the Warriors Three, JARVIS, Sleipnir, and a flock of pissed off crows storm the castle. Frigga would have come, but she’s having to stay in Asgard-the-city and deal with the politics of sanctioning an assault on one of Asgard’s own provinces.

Twitter: @JasperZasper for birds and other animals, @JasperMoar for writing stuff
A lot can happen in a day. For example: a man can be tortured by someone intent to push him until he dies without a care of how or when that happens. On a related note, over the course of a day, the Queen of a realm can sanction the assault of one of her provinces. Over the course of a day, a dragon can be recruited to the cause. A flock of carrion birds can gather too.

So yeah. A lot can happen.

What cannot happen in a day is the extraction of a spinal parasite. No, that requires several days. It does, however, happen successfully.

The disgusting thing sits innocuously at the bottom of a silver dish. In a satisfying turn of events, it itself is now paralyzed and awaiting disposal. Tony feels the urge to prod it with a stick or something.

One of Eir’s nurses takes the dish away, while Eir herself tilts Tony’s head to the side and examines the scabbed hole of his ear. Tony balks at the gentle touches, unable to mentally separate Eir’s care from the sensation of a worm dissolving his inner ear, despite how worlds-apart they are in nature. Loki soothes him, winds their fingers together. Over the four days Tony has been locked away in the infirmary, undergoing treatment to paralyze the parasite, fortify his spinal column, and carefully extract the slimy thing, Loki has been under foot near constantly.

Needless to say, Eir had been more than a little irritated, but Tony appreciates the concern. He really, really does.

“The problem here is the magical nature of hurgrorm venom,” Eir murmurs, almost to herself as she reads the output of a little gold wand hovering above Tony’s deafened ear. “They are born and bred in the waters of Nornheim, and their first days are spent wrapped in the threads of forgotten history. Physical venom, magical nature. We’ll need to let this resolve on its own.”

She daps a swab soaked in clear, pungent fluid around the rim of his ear, then pushes inward like a q-tip. The fluid numbs the skin completely, which is a goddamn relief from the near-constant burning, stabbing sensation.

“Why does it matter? The magical nature thing.”

Eir opens her mouth to respond, but Loki beats her to the punch.

“There are three basic kinds of injuries relating to magic. Magically caused, but physical in nature like a burn from summoned fire, the other way around like a poisoned potion, and completely magical, like a curse. Oh, sorry.”

Loki isn’t by any means faint of heart, so he doesn’t quite wilt at the scathing glare Eir levels him with for cutting her off, but he does dip his head in apology. Eir removes the swabbing material from Tony’s ear, and he’s morbidly fascinated by the rusty, blackened whatever that comes along crusted to it. A little sick, but still. Fascinated.

“The prince is correct,” she allows. “An injury which is physical in nature can be healed with the use of magic, no matter its cause. The issue comes with a magical nature. Unless the source of the
injury chooses to do the healing, you never quite know how the magic of malady will react to the magic of the healer. In many cases, everything will be fine. The wound will heal, and everyone goes on their merry way.” Eir rolls up a sharply-scented dressing, and carefully works it back into his numbed ear. Tony grimaces at the dull sensation. “Sometimes, the latent magic will react and wreak havoc on the injured person, or attach itself to the healer. Things can be exacerbated, or entirely new problems may arise. This little beast gorged itself on some of the most potent magical materials in the universe, when it first hatched.” She presses a chunk of folded gauze to his ear, lays a pad over that, and seals the whole thing with a net of glimmering gold. “I don’t feel confident enough in my skill to gamble with your nervous system.”

Which is saying something, apparently. Because Eir is powerful. She’s the Hestia of Asgard. The person people overlook, because she isn’t flashy or performative with her skills. She gets the job done, and never fails. Tony isn’t entirely certain how deep her power runs, because he’s pretty sure he’s never seen the full extent of it, but yeah. Hestia.

“So we will let the greatest healer of all tend you. Time.” She rounds the bed and begins peeling dressings from his back. They’ve been healing his body in patches. First the broken bones, then the cuts and burns. Eir explained that she didn’t want to unsettle the parasite and provoke it to cause more damage, but now that it’s gone, she sets to work putting Tony back to rights. “You may regain the use of your ear. You may not. We shall see. But if you remain deafened, I’m sure we can find a way to work around that.”

“Good to know.”

Tony is released that same day. With smooth skin dotted only by pre-apple scars and the odd freckle, Tony is whole. More or less. There’s still the whole ear thing, but he isn’t in extraordinary pain anymore. Yay. Thus frees, he finally learns what happened while he was Karnilla’s captive.

Sleipnir and JARVIS had raised the alarm almost as soon as Tony had been taken. Sleipnir recognized Karnilla, so it was really just a matter of politics after that. Karnilla had been the Lady of an Asgardian province, so Frigga had occupied herself gaining the support of the Nobles. No one wants a civil war on their hands. So yeah, support. Meanwhile, JARVIS had contacted Elder, and that’s how the dragon was brought in. Never let it be said that JARVIS has no concept of revenge and drama. Because really. A dragon rescue? Yeah, that isn’t understated.

Loki gained Thor and his pals’ support, and Dave (and through her, Hel) might have been a little pissed-off too. Which explains the weird army attacking Karnilla’s keep. But-

“So where’s the head?” Tony presses. Not that he really wants a severed head. Ew. Gross. But a promise is a promise.

“In Elder’s gut, if he hasn’t passed it by now,” Loki snips back, and oh no. That’s gross for a different reason. He didn’t need the mental image.

“What, he ate her?”

“Oh yes. Tore down the wall and snatched her from my grasp. One bite. He caused quite a stir. The Court of Nobles wanted her to stand trial for treason, not be executed where she stood. Of course, they can’t do anything about it. According to the draconian treaties, you, being indebted to him, belong to Elder as part of his willing hoard. With very few exceptions, we can’t demand any sort of ‘justice’ from a dragon protecting their hoard.”

“I get the feeling you consider justice served.”
“Hmm. Perhaps. I will say I’ve never been gladder for your idiocy.”

“Goddamnit, Lo.”

"Even you must admit that indebting yourself to an ancient dragon was not particularly wise."

Tony jabs his elbow into Loki’s ribs, but the smug fucker wraps slender fingers around his elbow and twists him around to press him playfully against the hallway wall, a raspy chuckle falling from his lips. Tony’s eyes are wide though. Another association snapping to the forefront of his thoughts as his heart goes wild behind the reactor. He can feel the rough wood of the blood-soaked table again, despite the smooth leather beneath his hands.

Loki notices immediately, and backs the fuck off.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs, removing himself from Tony’s personal bubble.

Tony automatically reaches back out for him, tangling his fingers in the silky sash across his partner’s chest.

“No, no no no, it’s fine,” he insists past the lump in his throat. “It feels better, when you touch me. Just- maybe no manhandling, for a little while. Okay?”

Loki studies his face for a moment, and relents. His runs his fingers through Tony’s swept-back hair- now longer than he’d ever kept it on Earth- and cups the back of his head.

“Okay,” Loki repeats softly. His other hand comes up to rest gently over the reactor shining through Tony’s thin shirt. His thumb strokes the near-weightless casing, and Loki’s green, green eyes bore into Tony’s. There’s still a glimmer of concern, and an ocean of caution, but they’re gentle. So gentle, for such piercing things. “You frightened me, svass. But- thank you. You gave yourself for my son.” Another pause, another tender caress. “You have such heart.”

It’s a little more of an emotional moment they’ve slipped into than Tony is really comfortable addressing, but he isn’t as ready to bolt and avoid it as he was years ago.

“Course I did. He’s a good kid.”

“Not so much a child anymore,” Loki corrects, which, okay. Yeah. Sleipnir’s pretty much a grown man, but still. He’s a kid to Tony.

“Sure, whatever. My point is- You love him, and I love him, and I love you. There was no choice to make.”

Simple as that. Tony wouldn’t trade his weird little family for anything in the universe.

The moment draws heavy and thick between them, but they’re in a brightly-lit hall, not the intimate privacy they probably need. So Tony redirects. He isn’t escaping. His isn’t avoiding. He’s redirecting.

He presses his hand over Loki’s, where it’s resting above the reactor. He glances down. No weird blue sparky thing in sight. That’s a topic. That’s a topic they can shift to.

“But not to ruin the moment or anything, I have a question. A magic question. I’ll trade a blowjob for answers,” he offers, and Loki laughs out loud. Bright, and surprised and honest. Not shocked, because Loki cracks dick jokes with the best of them, but taken off-guard.
“When have I ever demanded payment for your questions?”

“So you’re turning the blowjob down.”

“Of course not. But it need not be currency. What is your question?”

Tony leans his weight against the wall and lifts his shirt up, tucking it under his chin. His torso is exposed to anyone who walks by, but what the fuck ever. Magic question time.

“Those cuffs. They burned me when I tried to teleport.”

“Yes. They are crafted with the threads of forgotten fate- able to bind any power. They do tend to react negatively to escape attempts.”

“Yeah, I got that. I just- the bitch tried to grab my reactor, but I burned her. Or something. Somehow. Like, blue zappies shot her hands when she tried to touch. How did that happen, if my magic was bound?”

“Blue zappies,” Loki parrots with exasperated fondness. “I adore that. You called upon the power of blue zappies.”

“Shut up or answer my question, you dick.”

He still feels a little- okay, more than a little- on-edge. Like a piano string tightened far beyond its tone. He immediately regrets the snappish words, but Loki takes no offense.

“Very well! Calm yourself.” He quietly repeats ‘blue zappies’ once more, before framing his hands on either side of the reactor. “I am not entirely sure, having not seen what you describe. I do know, however, that when an item is imbued with power for enough time, it takes on the nature of the power. It develops- not a sentience. Not a mind. But-” He pauses, lips thinning as he thinks. “An awareness, of sorts. It becomes a reactive power of its own, even if the original source is removed. Like a battery holding a residual charge, after the energy source is removed. In this case, the charge may be an echo of your magic. Perhaps it reacted to your fear and distress. You yourself did not wield the power, so the cuffs did not respond. This is only a guess. I would need to see the event to offer anything more concrete.”

And Tony isn’t sure how to replicate the conditions without putting himself through torture again, which- no thank you. Nope. He grimaces.

“Now pull your shirt down. What will the others think?”

“They’ll think we’re preparing to have frantic life-affirming sex,” Tony purrs, but he drops his shirt, smoothing out the embroidered hem.

Loki’s thin lips quirk up, but he does kiss Tony. Steady and bruising- the sort of thing that leaves Tony’s mouth feeling hot and tingling.

“Perhaps later,” Loki promises, breath ghosting over Tony’s good ear. “For now, I believe you are expected.”

“Expected? Expected where?”

The workshop, apparently. Where his ragtag family lies in wait. Frigga, Thor, JARVIS. Even Elder, in his more humanoid, less gigantic skin. Blinky immediately scales Tony’s body and tries to pick at the bandage’s securing net, but Dave flutters over, and a sharp peck has the monkey
leaping away to the safety of Loki’s arms. Dave claims her spot on Tony’s shoulder, and nibbles her beak through Tony’s hair.

With the exception of Elder and Frigga, who have been dealing with the politics of Elder’s snack, everyone has visited Tony at some point in the infirmary, but here they all are. Hanging out around the warmth of the ever-burning forge. The only one missing is Sleipnir, but he makes an appearance not much later, pulling Unnur in tow. The smith immediately marches up to Tony and grips him by the shirt collar, but Tony just grins.

“You fucking sonuva bitch. You’re going to make me go gray, y’know that? Why’re you such a cursed trouble magnet? I had to learn about this bullshit from Idunn. No one thinks to tell me anything. Bastard.”

“I love you too,” Tony simply says, and Unnur scowls.

The archway to the air outside is open and bright. A far cry from the windowless cell and the damp, chilled torture chamber. A good place for a gathering. A good gathering, period. Frigga and Thor don’t stay long, simply wishing Tony a speedy recovery and expressing their gladness that he’s more or less fine. Sleipnir plays fetch with the monkeys, which definitely won’t end in disaster, and JARVIS hovers close to Tony at all times while Unnur inspects his workspace. Loki remains by his side, and honestly?

That’s all Tony needs. No welcome-back party. No big deal. Just- family.

Just family.

Chapter End Notes

So. Some of you might have noticed that there’s a definite number of chapters now. So, uh. We’re in the home stretch. Three more chapters to go. Ooooooh. I would like to make it known that the ending has been planned the way it will turn out since the very beginning. I’ve been waiting for this for two and a half years, and now we have three chapters to go.

And I’m seriously, honestly trying to finish up my new Star Trek chapter, but everything is so easy to write, except that. That one is coming along like pulling teeth.
Tony receives his first tattoo ever several months later, and it doubles as a hearing aid. An artificial eardrum. A really cool piece of ink. Multiple pieces of ink. An amalgam.

Long story short, his ear heals up, but the eardrum is essentially nonexistent, and as it turns out, you can’t mend what isn’t there. So Eir seals his middle ear off, and carefully, painstakingly develops an intricate design to anchor a set of spells to. It’s about the size of a quarter if a quarter was mashed into an oval, the lines all hair-thin, and he lays down on his front, arms folded beneath his chin, as she tattoos the design on the back of his ear with a handheld needle, specially-mixed ink, and nothing else.

It hurts, at first, but the pain turns down to a heated buzz as endorphins make their way to the scene. When the tattoo is finished, Eir heals it up with a wave of her hand, and then the fun part begins.

The first time sound comes rushing back in stereo rather than the mono he’s grown used to, Tony flinches. It’s a bizarre experience. Not quite as weird as losing half of his hearing in the first place, but still. Weird.

He passes all the tests Eir throws at him with flying colors. He pokes and prods at the tender, fully-healed tattoo with fascination.

“This should hold for the duration of your lifespan,” Eir explains as Tony examines the marking with the aid of two mirrors. Sure, Eir showed him the symbol on paper, but it’s a horse of a different color, seeing it on his skin. “I haven’t done this for an ear before, but the magic is a variant on standard procedure for prosthetic-users.”

“Sounds good.”

Loki makes an exaggerated gagging noise from where he sits, and Tony flaps a hand at him.

“That wasn’t intentional.”

“Your turn of phrase is no less appalling.”

“Alright, is this your doctor’s appointment? No? Didn’t think so. You don’t have to be here.”

“One would think my husband would appreciate his partner’s support,” Loki intones.
Given the frequency with which the two of them find their way into Eir’s realm, and their tendency to stick together like velcro, Eir has long since grown used to their bickering. That does not, however, mean she doesn’t mind it.

They’re sent on their way.

Dave doesn’t come to visit them anymore, but that’s largely because she’s nesting. Four speckled, dull teal eggs resting up a tree in a woven bowl of sticks. She’s very proud of them, from what Tony can tell. She certainly makes a show of strutting around the rim of her nest whenever Tony scales the tree to check them out.

Anyways, Dave’s recent unwillingness to leave the rose garden hardly means Tony never sees her. In fact, the first thing he does with his new tattoo is visit her. Naturally, this also means letting her jam her smooth beak into his ear to churr happily. The sacrifices he makes.

When her chicks hatch, Loki tells him, and thus two of Asgard’s princes go sit in a tree and watch four floppy, wet, downy chicks wriggle around until Dave’s mate settles down to keep them warm. The white-speckled crow fluffs up as Dave runs her beak through his feathers.

It’s adorable. Absolutely adorable.

Time goes by. Dave’s chicks feather out, and Tony places each of them back in their nest at different points in time, until Frigga chides him and tells him that’s just part of growing up for Dave’s species- getting cocky, falling down, and wandering around while Mom and Dad watch over them and teach them how to fly. Best not to interfere. Not in this.

By the time Loki convinces him to take up a non-armored weapon, the clutch of four is fully grown, and the family of six spreads out. Dave and her mate- freshly-named Hector, once Tony figures out he’s going to stick around and make himself a nuisance- remain based in the rose garden. Their kids come and go. Tony is absolutely convinced they keep in touch, because all six have a knack for clustering in the training fields when Tony explores weapons.

Loki teaches him how to fight with knives, first. Sharp knives. No dull training knives for Tony. It’s sink or swim. He acquires some interesting scars in the process. Of course, Loki heals Tony’s minor injuries with a gentle, possessive touch of cold hands, but if Tony thinks something’s going to look particularly badass, he convinces his partner to let the wound heal on its own.

He tries out a shortspike, an ax, a hammer. He plays with a sword and quickly finds that it’s much less fun to use than Arthurian legends and Hollywood led him to believe. Sure, he’s okay with it. Yeah, he could probably avoid being killed immediately in an actual fight, but uh, no. Not really his thing.

Staves, though. Those are unexpectedly delightful.

Speak softly and carry a big stick. Tony likes big sticks.

It takes him about six years to hone his skills to something passable by immortal standards, and thirty more to get really good. Six years of sore arms and landing on his ass as Loki twirls a polished ironwood staff, the showoff. Thirty more years of ‘pole’ jokes, of Tony explaining what a pole dancer is, which leads to a very interesting trip to a similar establishment Loki knows of. Thirtysix long, happy, satisfying years. By the time Sleipnir’s wedding comes around, Tony can hold his ground, and even lay Loki flat on his back from time to time.

But oh- yeah. Sleipnir gets married. Finally pops the question, so to speak, and the baker’s
daughter finds her way into the line of succession. It’s got to be one of the longest courtships in history, but unlike his father, Sleipnir apparently likes to take things slow.

The ceremony is simple and small, according to the wishes of the couple. Idunn allows the wedding to take place in her garden. Gudrun’s violet cloak—lovingly embroidered and gifted by Frigga—flutters like iris petals in the breeze as she walks alongside her youngest brother. In her hands she cradles a tiny box, within which rests an amethyst-studded ear cuff—the display of her colors. Tony made the necklace Sleipnir carries—this one a platinum choker bearing a single sapphire.

Loki conducts the ceremony as both a prince and father. Much like his own wedding to Tony, the couple’s wrists are wrapped together in ribbon, and so it begins.

By the end, Sleipnir has a new piercing circling the fold of his helix, and a small, glimmering sapphire settles neatly into the hollow of Gudrun’s throat. They’ll wear each other’s colors so long as the marriage holds, and Tony genuinely, sincerely hopes that it’ll hold for a long, long time. Sleipnir picks up his bride, spinning her around with a shining grin as she laughs.

Inevitably, there’s a party, because of course there is. Sleipnir might be called a bastard behind his back, but Frigga recognizes him as legitimate no matter who the father was, simply by virtue of being Loki’s son. That technically makes him a prince, and as stuffy as the Asgardian court can be, they do love a good feast.

So yes. A party, and all the gifts and dancing and feasting and invasive questions that come with that sort of thing. Thor’s the one who brings up babies, because he really does like to throw around blessings of ‘fertility’. Why he’s the patron of fertility still escapes Tony, given his utter lack of children.

Sleipnir and Gudrun accept his blessing cordially, but the moment the thunderer wanders away for more potent mead, Sleipnir leans in close to Loki to whisper—well, not whisper. Say. Say, at a normal tone of voice that seems like a whisper relative to the din of the music and dancing and laughing and feasting—Say something Tony doesn’t catch.

Loki, however, lights up like a goddamn firework. He catches his son and daughter-in-law’s hands and clasps them tightly, replying with animated enthusiasm while Gudrun beams. Tony picks at a little crusty, salty-sweet pastry, unwilling to intrude on their little moment.

It hardly matters, though. Loki makes a beeline for Tony as soon as he’s free, and Tony shoves the rest of the pastry rosette into his mouth. It goes down a little dry, but his hands are free, and Loki snatches up the both of them, hauling Tony across the massive hall and out into the cool evening air.

“Gudrun is with child,” Loki announces when it’s just the two of them, the din of the wedding party still plainly audible through the massive, viney mats of plantlife forming an intricate labyrinth. “Sleipnir is to be a father, and I, a grandfather.”

Tony’s mouth opens to offer congratulations, but Loki steamrolls right over him, caught up in his own excitement.

“I tried for decades to conceive Hel and—Fenrir.” He sobers up for a moment, the little elevens between his eyebrows making their appearance, but he shakes his head like a cat flicking a leaf away, and makes the mental shift back to a more subdued excitement. “I tried for decades, with Angrboda.” Tony’s heard that story, spoken in hushed tones beneath the thick blankets of their bed. The forbidden, unlikely love between an Asgardian prince and a Jotun outcast—ended prematurely
by Odin’s word and an executioner’s gilded ax. “For my son to have a child so soon after he and Gudrun became intimate-”

Tony silences his partner with a kiss. Loki doesn’t resist, simply snakes one of his pale, sturdy arms around Tony, clutching him close in return. Tony brushes his partner’s hair—finally, finally allowed to regain a bit of its natural curl—back behind Loki’s ear.

“I’m gonna stop you right there, babe.” Another quick kiss, and Loki’s eyes crinkle in a teasing smile. “I’m happy for you, and for Sleipnir. I am. Really. I just can’t listen to you talk about your son’s sex life. That’s creepy, man.”

Bright, cackling laughter erupts from Loki, but he concedes.

They stand there in relative seclusion, chest to chest. Tony’s rough thumb strokes across Loki’s smooth cheek. A rooster and a peacock, that’s what they are. Refinement and rough edges, all bundled together, two into one.

“Let’s stay here, for a while,” Loki suggests, voice soft. “Dance with me.”

“I can’t make any music out from the mess back there,” Tony counters, though they both know he’ll agree.

“Dance with me to the tune of the cosmos. Play your space-threads like a harp, and move with me throughout the stars.”

Loki takes a step, and Tony follows suit, his hands slipping down to rest comfortably on his partner’s hips.

“Someone’s feeling poetic tonight.”

“Someone is feeling hopeful. And so, so unbelievably lucky.” Tony follows step for step, twist for turn, slow dancing to the sounds of the night and the bustle of a party that now feels miles away. “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

Tony swallows thickly. That hits a little close to home. He’s afraid sometimes, when anxiety eats at his bones and sits heavy in his chest. When memories claw their way through his vulnerable dreams, and a phantom ache gnaws at his ear—Sometimes he fears that is he blinks, even for a moment, everything will be gone, and he’ll be back in a desert cave, with this all being some elaborate fever-dream. He doesn’t know what he’d do without his family.

“Believe me,” he murmurs. “That goes both ways.”

Despite the solemn tone, the moment slips its way into the ever-growing vault of things Tony never wants to forget—of memories he wouldn’t trade away for the world. Warm and safe, wrapped in Loki’s arms and Loki wrapped in his, they enjoy the stolen moment of peace, but eventually, the return to the celebration, hand in hand.

The celebration winds down with the rising of the sun. Sleipnir and Gudrun are long gone, having spirited away to their rooms shortly after midnight. Loki, for his part, pulls Tony from the party by the wedding ring hooked on a chain around his neck, pulling on the necklace like a leash. Tony’s strength matches Loki’s nowadays, thanks to Elder’s merciless training and the effects of that one golden apple, but the fight he puts up is entirely for show. He’s all too happy to let his partner manhandle him, toss him on their bed. He bounces on the forgiving material, propping himself up on his elbows, and Loki wastes absolutely no time in claiming his spot on Tony’s lap. Their clothes are discarded with head-spinning rapidness, and Loki wraps his fingers around the casing of the
reactor. Tony’s heart beats like a trapped bird, but he isn’t afraid— he never is. Not with Loki.

“I now hold your most vulnerable point,” Loki purrs. “And yet you do nothing.”

“You and I are two pieces to the same puzzle, sweetheart. Why would I fight myself?”

Loki’s thin lips quirk up, and as he leans down, a transformation washes over his body. Her breasts press to Tony’s chest, and she mouths at his throat, kissing up to his ear to whisper, “You have heart, you ridiculous thing.”

Time slips by, and Gudrun’s belly grows. Loki busies himself helping the expecting parents prepare; Tony isn’t any good at this childcare shit, but he lets himself be roped into helping anyways. A little over a year passes, and over the span of a few hours, the preparation becomes intimately valuable. Loki peers down at the squalling bundle in Sleipnir’s arms, and Tony can sort of see the appeal. The kid is loud as hell, but sort of cute. Fenris, as Sleipnir and Gudrun name him, quiets down with a good meal, and the infant remains in remarkably good spirits as he’s passed around like a party favor, to Loki, to Frigga, to Thor, to Tony. And okay, yeah. Something warm and melty pools in Tony, as that scrunchy face looks up at him with wide, ever-startled eyes. He nudges the swaddling blanket down with one finger, touches the paper-thin skin of Fenris’s chin, and the kid makes a little burbling sound.

He’s never wanted kids. Not really. There was a while in his early twenties when he did want a baby, just to prove he could be a better dad than Howard, but an actual, real kid? Yeah, best not to let Tony get his hands on one. He’d be a shit father figure, anyways.

Loki, however. Loki doesn’t think that.

Fenris learns to crawl, and then to toddle, and because Sleipnir doesn’t want an impersonal nanny to have any hand in raising his son, Tony and Loki find themselves on babysitting duty from time to time.

It was only a matter of time, really.

“I have been thinking,” Loki begins slowly, as Fenris bangs painted blocks together.

“You have the best thoughts, babe. Lay it on me.”

“I would like to bear your child.”

Tony chokes on air, and Loki waits patiently as he recovers. Fenris turns to look at him with his big green eyes, freckles dotting his face like constellations. Apparently satisfied with what he sees, the kid returns to his self-made game.

He tries to find words, because fuck, that’s a whole can of worms in and of itself.

But he isn’t- He isn’t opposed. Not like he thought he would be.

“I’m not saying no,” he manages. Loki looks at him expectantly. “I’m not saying no. I just- I’ve gotta think about that, okay? I mean, I’m not gonna lie. I’ve thought about it. Just, in the hypothetical.”

He needs to think about it in the factual. The possible. The maybe.

So he thinks. Loki bears with him for the few years he takes to make up his mind. He thinks, and—well.
They’re going to try for a baby. Loki’s going to settle himself down with the right parts, despite however he feels or presents up top. They’re going to try for a baby, and Tony’s going to make an attempt at being a father. Possibly. There’s relatively low fertility amongst the immortals, which makes sense from an overpopulation-prevention standpoint, so Tony still has some time to get used to the idea, but he’s- Maybe looking forward to it. A little.

So life seems good.

And then the outposts at the edge of the Known begin going dark.

Chapter End Notes

Babieeeeess. Loki responds to the knowledge that he's going to be a grandparent like that guy who was told via charades.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjwukGXXy4Q

Dun dun DUUUUN! What's around the corner? Can anyone guess? Could it be the villain that's been explicitly mentioned already, about halfway back to the beginning?

Guys, I have 127 unreplied to comments in my inbox XD I might have to start fresh. Please dont feel annoyed if I dont reply to something you sent in the last few months. Im So, so grateful for all of your support and love.

One last thing: I'm @JasperMoar (writing and fandom stuff) and @JasperZasper (animal stuff) on twitter. Find me there for updates on the rewrite of this monster fic. I'll be announcing when a chapter's been rewritten as it happens.
Forty Nine

Chapter Notes

This chapter. Is 60 words short of hitting 15000. It. Has murdered me. I'm praying there are no egregious errors, b/c I'm exhausted and have a headache and really can't curb my impulse control enough to postpone publishing it.
In addition, some notes I put at the top of this chapter while writing:

I know Muspelheim isn’t supposed to be the realm of the dwarves, but the summarized reason for why this is so here is in chapter 18’s notes.

Also, Instead of writing a lab report, I mathematically calculated the equations for how those in the Nine Realms age compared to humans. I have that equation now. It’s very specific.

Tony is JARVIS’s entire world, and JARVIS has no problems saying it.

Cool, so that's out of the way. Classes went well for me this semester. I brought my GPA up, and I'm one semester away from graduating!

Go listen to Save This City by Zayde Wolf, and Losing Hold by Esterly and Austin Jenckes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Well well. Here you are again.”

Ageless as ever, Mercel pads to the mouth of her cell with all the grace of a vulture on the wing. She regards Tony with glittering eyes, and her filed nails tap at the golden net encapsulating her cell. Little bursts of light like the blinking of a firefly flare upon contact. Despite the spartan conditions she’s been kept in these past few centuries, Mercel presents herself like the consort she once was. She’s managed to keep her hands smooth, her nails clean; the weight of her white hair twists in a loose braid and drapes over one shoulder. The plain beige scrubs do her no favors, but she nevertheless holds herself like she’s still Odin’s favorite.

“What is it you need?”

“What, I can’t visit my favorite viper without a reason? I’m hurt, Mercy. I’m hurt.”


“It’s been great, thanks. Really a crying shame you couldn’t come to the wedding. So, uh. Here’s the deal. We’ve got some questions, and I’m playing nice cop.”

With little else to do in her barren cage, Mercel had turned to obsessing over her former rival for Odin’s attention- Frigga- and Tony. Why Tony? Uh, yeah. He still doesn’t know. Thor’s the one who crushed the Bifrost to stop her plan. Loki’s the one who actually brought her down. Tony? He was just an accessory in that whole shebang.
Loki’s fingers caress the small of his back, but Tony doesn’t react to the silent show of support. As far as Mercel can see—unless she has some sort of crazy magic vision they aren’t aware of—the space behind Tony is empty. As far as she knows, he has come here alone.

“By all means, ask what you will of me.”

“What’s your boyfriend up to?”

“How should I know? I’ve been here. Alone. For—let’s see. How long has it been?”

“Y’know? I haven’t been keeping track.”

Two centuries. Or, thereabouts. Maybe a little longer. The years sort of blend together towards the beginning there. Tony only knows it’s been at least two hundred years since he first joined the ranks of the immortal.

In a weird, roundabout way, he has Mercel to thank for that. Sort of. If he squints.

“I’m hurt,” she echoes slowly, deliberately. Her violet eyes pierce Tony like a sword. A twinge of remembered pain plucks beneath his ribs.

“Yeah, well. That sucks. But hey! I still have questions you might have answers to. Or, y’know. Commands. Oh! Like this one!” He hooks his thumbs in the broad, tooled leather belt cinched around his waist to tighten the otherwise-loose tunic. “Tell me everything you know about his army. Size. Variety. Weapons. Ships. Anything, everything, all the things.”

“What a wonderfully specific question!”

Her chiming laughter pierces Tony’s ears, but he’s running out of patience. Teasing banter is fun with people he likes. Such as, uh, his partner, or stepson, or Unnur. With Mercel? Yeah, not so neat.

“Mercel,” he warns, and she lifts her hands in placation, lips curve up.

“Very well. I will tell you what I know.”

Which is, y’know. Great and all. It’s exactly what he came here for. But the ease with which she changes gears raises little red flags.

She begins with the armies. As in, two of them. The Chituari, and the Outlanders. Tony records everything she says on a transcription crystal. Up in his workshop, the resonance match will be behaving as a remote voice-to-text operator. Here, though, Tony nudges Mercel in the direction they need to go.

Like a wind-up toy, Tony sets the path and watches her go. They move on from armies to equipment, from war animals to weaponry. She brings up a hoard of ashen dragons, which Tony files away to ask Elder about later. She brings up the Black Order, of which she claims to be a part. She brings up a whole fuck ton of stuff. Most of probably outdated, given the, y’know, two centuries of gap time, but it’s a start. A really important start. It’s been hard to find people willing to mention Thanos, beyond the Titan envoy coming to tell them their history with him.

“You’ve certainly been a chatty Kathy,” Tony throws out there when Mercel finally trails off. Her shimmering bronze lips quirk up in a razor-sharp smile.

“I see no reason to hide from you your doom.”
“It seems less like doom when we know what’s coming,” he counters. Her laughter peals like crystal chimes.

“Indeed?” Her heavy braid drapes across her shoulder as she tilts her head to the side like a parent watching their child do something particularly adorable and nonsensical. “Let me tell you one more thing, Tony Stark.” Silence drags thick between them, broken only by the sounds of the other prisoners locked away in Asgard’s honeycomb dungeon. The razor-blade smile softens, sweetens like honey. “It matters not that you feel ready. When he comes, nothing will matter. You will fall like flies to a frost.” Her fist slams against the glittering gold barrier. “You will never truly be prepared.”

Tony waits a beat, then sucks on his teeth, the wet, obnoxious sound breaking the tension. Well, in his mind it does. Probably just pisses Mercel off, though she’s too composed to show it.

“Yeah… We’ll see. So, uh. Catch you later, alright? It’s been fun, but I think this playdate’s gotta end. M’kay?”

Her arms spread wide.

“I am hardly in any position to stop you, am I?”

“No, you really aren’t.”

Tony flicks her a lazy salute. He feels for Loki’s hand, and as he laces his fingers with Loki’s to pull him down the high, long hall, his partner shimmers into view. The sight of the prince draws shouts and calls from the various people who’ve had a long, long time to let their hate of the royal family fester, but they ignore them.

“Tony,” Mercel calls moments later, just before they’re out of sight.

Her voice carries beneath the roars of the other prisoners. Tony hesitates and glances over his shoulder to see her leaning against the barrier of her cell, toying with the locks of her braid. That sly little smile is back.

“What happens when you girdle a tree?”

Tony rolls his eyes. More riddles.

“Y’know, I’ll hafta get back to you on that one.”

He resumes his path, and soon he and Loki set off up the long, long staircase.

“That went well,” Loki comments dryly.

“How much of that d’you think we can use?”

Loki’s thumb strokes across the back of his hand.

“I believe that depends on whether she truly believes we have no chance.” A thoughtful noise catches in Loki’s throat. “And how much scouts can confirm.”

So pretty much along the lines of what Tony was thinking. Fantastic.

They split off from eachother at the head of the stairway. Tony presses a kiss to Loki’s cheek and heads up in the direction of his workshop, while Loki vanishes in a flash of green, off to check his own unnamed sources- the ones he doesn’t really talk about. Promised anonymity and all that.
In the workshop, Tony compresses the transcript onto a crystal spool. The format is unusual to Tony, but Thor has explained that the switch from flat pads to round projecting spools allows for more durable and easily transported information if magical transmissions fail for some reason. He flags moments he considers important, including that one odd tree comment, and shoots the transcript off to Skadi’s Scouts. Such an innocent term for a clandestine group of spies and assassins. Hunters of Men, Loki calls them. Skadi herself is as delicate as a porcelain doll, with sharp eyes the color of purpled clouds at sunset. There’s something off about her, and Tony hopes never to cross her.

He whistles sharply, and Horace- the largest of Dave’s offspring- flits through the open wall.

“Where’s Tom?” Tony murmurs as he fits the bird with her harness. “I thought he was on messenger duty today.”

She nibbles his fingers in response, and Tony tsks softly.

“Stay still, sweetpea.”

Horace behaves, and not five minutes later Tony sends her off to Skadi’s hall as well. The physical transcript on her back will be stored with all other copies of information- a backup, in case things fall apart.

With war creeping over the horizon, Tony finds himself with little time to rest. There’s a map in Frigga’s war room- a glimmering gold projection of the nine realms and their relative locations in space. Svartalfheim is flagged in red, having already been forfeited like a pawn to Thanos’s approach. Nidavellir is predicted to be next. Both are barren, dead worlds, so neither is much of a loss; allowing them to be taken provides the inhabited realms more time to prepare.

It’s a giant game of 3-D chess, made stranger by the lack of actual connectivity between the Nine Realms. They’re spread up and down one of the Milky Way’s arms like beads suspended mid-throw, and between them span entire empires and federations and republics and every other conceivable kind of governance and civilization. Space is big. Really fucking big.

Naturally a question springs to Tony’s mind: Why did the Nine come together, being so far apart?

It comes down to threads. Not that Loki and Frigga have explained them as such, but that’s how Tony makes sense of things. Those threads he pulls to jump from one end of the galaxy to the other spread like capillaries through Yggdrasil. Asgard may be physically closer to the Kree Empire, but the two exist on separate branches, so to speak. Ages and ages ago- so long ago that even Asgardians don’t have the exact timeframe recorded- the Nine came into contact largely by accident through exploring the natural bridges between their realms- some of which Loki’s shown him. Then ancient Asgardians built the Bifrost, and piggybacked off of those natural bridges to keep in contact before they figured out how to make their own connections to other planets.

And why not reach out to those civilizations between them? Why not join up? Ally themselves?

Frigga chalks this up to focusing on her most ancient allies, and not spreading resources too thin to be effective. And Tony? Tony doesn’t know enough about interplanetary warfare to argue. Nor does he have the right blood to be taken seriously by the Court of Nobles when he sits in on their arguments. There’s a reason he hasn’t been placed in charge of lands or stations or in any other way immersed into the politics of running an empire. Despite Frigga’s favor and his centuries living in Asgard, he’s still a foreigner in a nationalistic kingdom, married by a foreign planet’s law to a person whose species most Asgardians merely tolerate due to Frigga and Loki’s ambassadorial efforts. He’s a Prince of Asgard by title alone, which earns him deference, but not respect outside
of the relatively small group of people he’s had direct contact with.

Tony scratches at his the scruff of his beard. He doesn’t really bother with shaping it so intricately anymore. Clipped and neat? Yes. Painstakingly pruned? Yeah, not so much. Turns out, Loki likes the cave-man scruff. His fingernails catch over the wiry hair, and he pushes away from the workbench. No rest for the wicked. Tyr awaits.

Loki hates the man for his part on Fenrir’s demise, but everything he’d done was perfectly legal and condoned by Odin, back when his wits hadn’t yet been snatched from him. He was the one to collect the chains from Muspelheim, and he was the one to convince Fenrir to let himself be chained. So yeah. An enemy of Loki, but a well-respected noble. Also currently, the self-proclaimed ‘tinkerer’ under whom Tony works. He’s a nice-enough guy, despite being blindly-loyal to a fault. Brilliant too. The kind of person Tony would have absolutely loved brainstorming with, had history been different. As things stand, he takes Loki’s side, and keeps their interactions impersonal and professionally brisk.

The maintenance and upgrading of Asgard’s defenses to a war-ready status fall under Tyr’s purview. The modifications and testing of Asgard proper’s shields have been delegated to Tony. He simply-reports. Reports to Tyr, on a weekly basis. Which is strange. The role of student comes easily. One thing Tony loves is learning, but being a subordinate? That’s a more difficult role to fall into.

Needs must, however. Tyr remains respectful as always, and Tony returns the favor as he walks the nobleman through the progress made. A secondary shield generator is slated for completion within the year- this one to project a force field just within the primary shield. Like bubble-wrapping Asgard. Sort of. If the new layer holds up under test fire, the other generators dotted around Asgard’s border will soon have a secondary system tacked on as well.

With Tyr appeased, Tony has just enough time for a meal before his audience with Frigga. He presents her with the transcript of his interview with Mercel, and summarizes his progress with the shields. Frigga listens with lofty grace. She hardly ever ‘turns off’ anymore, and Tony’s fairly certain she won’t do so again until the threat to her people is defeated.

“Thank you, Tony. You sent this to Skadi as well?”

She passes off the transcript to an underling, and he ferries it off to its next destination.

“Do you trust what you have given me?”

“No.” Frigga’s delicate eyebrows furrow. “I mean, she was pretty goddamn forthcoming, and- she obviously doesn’t like us. Mercel still talks about Thanos like he’s her god.” His shoulders lift just slightly. “Take it with a pinch of salt.”

“I see. I cannot say this comes as a surprise.” She nods sharply. “Skadi will verify. That will be all.”

The clear dismissal comes far less warmly than any other goodbye he’s received from Frigga, but Tony knows better than to take this personally. He bows shallowly and turns on his heel to head out the door.

“Tony,” Frigga calls, just as he steps outside. He pauses and looks back to her. Her hands are clasped tightly before her, her knuckles white. “I-” A pause, and then she softens. “I believe JARVIS and Fenris were looking for you, earlier. Perhaps you should go find them.”
Something niggles at the edge of Tony’s thoughts, and he studies her for a moment, chewing on his lower lip. She isn’t quite sincere. There’s something behind her words that Tony can’t quite place, and her perfect, angelic mask betrays nothing.

“I will do so,” he allows cautiously. “Will that be all?” A pause of his own, before he tacks on- “Your Majesty?”

“Yes.” Then finally she smiles, the expression warm. Her hands slide around to clasp behind her back. “Thank you Tony.”

Every fiber of Tony’s being demands he stay and figure out what exactly she’s keeping from him, but before he can make up his mind, one of Skadi’s tattooed scouts claims the queen’s attention. He bows out after only a moment’s hesitation.

Whatever she’s hiding, Frigga is at least true to her word, when he seeks out his grandson, he finds JARVIS engaged in archery with the young, flame-haired Fenris. They’re pretty sure that changing his hair color is the limit to the shapeshifting abilities the kid’s inherited from Sleipnir, but you never know. Last month Fenris paraded about with mint green curls bouncing around his head, soft as you please. Maybe next month he’ll gallop around as a horse.

He catches JARVIS’s eye as the construct returns with a handful of arrows plucked from their targets, and Fenris, sharp as ever, whirls around at JARVIS’s smile.

“Grandfather!” he squeals. Tony very quickly ends up with an armful of child. Aesir growth rates are something Tony still doesn’t quite grasp. For now he gets it, but Loki has explained to him that as those inhabiting the Nine age, the rate at which they age slows. If things were linear, Tony estimates that the age of majority would be about a hundred. Nope. It’s like, six hundred. And then things go linear after that. Why? Tony doesn’t have a fucking clue. Space biology is weird shit. And that’s before you add magic apples to the mix.

However it works, Fenris is the equivalent of a seven-year-old human child, while in truth being at the tender age of thirty seven. And that is, apparently, perfectly normal.

“Hey, kid,” Tony greets warmly. He lifts his grandson up into his arms, but Fenris immediately begins struggling to be let down again, laughing all the while. “I heard you were looking for me.”

Fenris lands on his feet and stumbles, but steadies himself. He beams up at Tony.

“I was. I- everyone is so busy. I just- I wanted-”

The kid trails off, the smile slipping from his face, melting into uncertainty. Tony ruffles his scarlet hair, and that, at least, tugs the frown away.

“I get it.” It’s been centuries, but immortality does wonders for memory. He vividly remembers loneliness from his childhood, with Howard too busy and Mom too drunk to make a functional family. “Hey, I need to bring JARVIS up, talk about his anchor for a bit. You should come too.” He tilts his head, looking at Fenris from the corners of his eyes. “After that it’s your choice. I’m free.”

Fenris wrinkles his nose. Mechanics is… not his thing. Not yet, at least. Tony still holds onto the hope that maybe, just maybe, he’ll convert his grandson, but for now it’s an uphill battle.

“I won’t need to take part in the conversation, will I?” the kid verifies.

“Nope. You can harass the monkeys.”
Hook, line, and sinker.

Once Tony gets Fenris situated, surrounded by Dave’s smallest two children- Robert and Daphne- plus the four bizarre monkeys, he turns to JARVIS. Down to business.

They’ve been discussing removing JARVIS’s anchor. Making it a decentralized thing. The citrine glows sedately beneath JARVIS’s tunic, and it really should stay that way, in Tony’s opinion. But JARVIS has other views.

What if, when the war comes, they find themselves separated? What if another event like Tony’s fall into a collapsing cave were to happen again? What then? Tony would be truly alone.

Tony still believes keeping JARVIS’s body self-sustaining makes the most sense. What if, like JARVIS fears, he does fall. He does find himself trapped, or lost, or stuck. What then? Will Tony drag JARVIS down with him?

But JARVIS is his own person. So Tony, of course, relents.

He’s figured out how to make the switch, now. Pop out the citrine, etch some contact lines in its surface, and snap it back into a vambrace for Tony to wear. Easy peasy. The process takes fifteen minutes tops, and JARVIS’s skin melts over the gap where the citrine once was, leaving only a slight depression.

“I do not wish to lose you,” JARVIS murmurs, helping Tony buckle the vambrace on once more. “Nor you, me. Thank you.”

“I should be thanking you, shouldn’t I?” Tony flexes his hand, feeling the smooth, molded leather shifts around his wrist and forearm as his muscles bunch. “You really can’t think of anything better to do than babysit me?”

“Not a thing.” JARVIS’s hand rests on his shoulder. “You made me. You are…” He seems to struggle for a moment, then two. Long enough that Tony looks up at him, forehead creased in concern. JARVIS never fails to find his words. “You.”

“Yeah, I got that, bud.”

“No, Tony- sir.” Ink-stain eyes bore into Tony’s with an intensity Tony hasn’t ever seen from JARVIS. “You are you. There are no other words to describe you. To describe what you are. To me.”

Tony swallows thickly, and he pats JARVIS on the arm.

“Flatterer.” He shifts to step away, but immediately sways back in for a hug. When he finally does step back, he straightens his vest and nods to himself. “You’re stuck with me now. No backsies.”

So that’s that. Weirdly intense little moment aside, Tony counts the procedure a success. They test the enchantments a few times, but for every time JARVIS dissolves into a stream of golden light circling down into the citrine, he shows back up in the same manner. Even Fenris takes interest, now that he’s certain magic rather than machinery is at play.

Loki returns home a few days later. Frigga is the first to know, as she receives his report. Fenris is the second. Tony doesn’t mind being the third. After all, Tony’s never lost faith in the promise housed within the gold and emerald ring he wears on a chain around his neck. Being skipped over in visitation doesn’t change that. When Loki does come to him, Tony greets him with a kiss and a quiet ‘welcome home’.
But Loki’s thumb digs circles into his palm. It’s a tell he’s never really grown out of- a sign Tony spots a mile away.

“What’s up, buttercup?”

Loki pauses for just a moment, but the second of stillness passes, and Loki comes to take Tony by the hand.

“We must go to Elder. Mother wishes him to come negotiate an alliance between Asgard and his clan.” He licks his thin lips. “I also- I wish to ask- whether he will house Jormungandr.”

“What? Why?”

Tony rubs light, soothing circle on the back of Loki’s hand. The jury’s still out on whether the touch helps prevent Loki from tearing his palms apart due to nerves and stress, but hey, no harm in trying.

Green eyes meet Tony’s.

“Midgard does not possess the fortifications of Asgard. However.” Loki swallows, and Tony’s heart thumps painfully in his chest. Jormungandr is such an open wound for Loki, and Tony wishes he could swoop in and fix everything. Bring Jor home. Make things better. “I have gone to Midgard, these past days. Jormungandr still refuses to come to me. He will not come to Asgard by will, and I have not the heart to cage him. Even to protect him. In Elder’s cavern, he will be safe. On Kra-id’s moons, even. Just- I must see him safe.”

“Midgard will be safe, though. We won’t let Thanos reach it.”

Loki’s fingers tighten hard enough to be painful around Tony’s hand.

“I must be certain. He must be safe.”

Loki’s other hand buries itself in the untamed, sweeping curls of Tony’s hair, and he rests his forehead against Tony’s.

“I have failed him. So, so many times.” Those green eyes slip closed. “I cannot fail him again.”

So yeah. With tensions high and no time to spare, they make time.

Tony first approaches Elder. When he arrives in the dragon’s cave, he catches his mentor churning up dirt in the greenhouse portion of the lair. Elder notices Tony immediately and halts his actions.

Speak your mind, child. Why have you come?

Tony hold his arms out to the sides, just slightly.

“I've got questions, why else? I mean- yes. To visit. But for now- yes. Questions.” He runs his hands through his hair again. “First- Loki needs to move his son from Midgard. He- We were- We want to know if we can move him to Kra-id’s moon. Specifically the moon of your clan.”
Elder’s crystal violet eyes narrow, but he doesn’t immediately deny the request. No- instead, he seems to consider the question, before finally saying:

*It is not acceptable, to allow outsiders near Kra-id. I made an exception for you as my student, and Loki as your mate.*

“Please, Elder.” Tony genuinely considers going to his knees, but he’s never groveled before. He doesn’t- He’s pretty sure Elder wouldn’t be impressed anyways. “Loki, he- he’s lost too many children already.”

*Is Midgard no longer safe, then?*

The curious tone washes over Tony, but he lets it slide right off.

“No, it’s safe, but- I know you never wanted- wanted chicks. But Loki’s family is everything to him. And- And Kra-id isn’t even in the galaxy, right?” Tony swallows thickly. “Midgard is safe, but it’s at just as much risk as the rest of the Nine. We want to know Jormungandr is safe.”

Elder regards Tony for several long, silent minutes that feel like hours. Had Tony been a younger man, he would have long begun fidgeting, but as things stand he manages to hold back. He is, however, adept enough at reading Elder that he can see the moment Elder relents.

*Very well,* the dragon allows. *I find denying you to be unreasonably difficult.*

Immediately Tony feels lighter. Tension he hadn’t realized he was holding melts away, and the scales around Elder’s eyes soften slightly in what Tony can recognize as fondness. But then- on to other matters. He wets his lips.

“Thank you, Elder. I- Thank you. But there’s more.” He pauses a moment. “What do you know about ashen dragons?”

Elder’s demeanor changes in an instant. His jaws snap, and a thunderous growl echoes around the cavern. Tony takes half a step back at the sudden aggression, but he steels himself to hold his ground.

*Where did you hear this?* Elder hisses. A crackling sound like shattering ice floes accompanies mental projection.

“Mercel,” Tony replies without hesitation. “She has said- that Thanos keeps a hoard of ashen dragons under his command.”

When the stone of a dead or comatose dragon is not returned to Kra-id… It can be reanimated. But it is- empty. All the strength, but none of the mind. A shadow. Like- a puppet or a toy. To kill one is a feat in itself. Elder rolls to his feet, wings shuffling on his back. Tony watches as he paces, traveling from one end of the cavern to the other in mere paces. *They appear from time to time, but- She specified ‘hoard’?*

Sharp eyes pin Tony in place as Elder grinds to a motionless halt.

“Yeah- yes. She definitely said hoard. I just- I thought that was wordplay or something.”

Elder’s claws dig into the ground, and his lips pull back again in a horrible snarl.

*I must make inquiries. It is, however, possible that one of mine- Let me explain.* Elder drops back down with an agitated thump. *Long ago, we aided King Bor in his battle against the Dark Elves. It*
was upon this assistance that the treaty between Asgard and my clan was formed. But this war- the Dark Elves had weapons we had never seen. Weapons which tore through dragonhide like paper. Weapons we destroyed, but weapons which nonetheless destroyed many of us first. My Nova fell to one such assault, and yet I did not die alongside them. I was weak, though. The bonding of dragons is not like your marriages. It has nothing to do with law. It is a fundamental joining of spirits. One soul in two bodies. And I had lost one half of my soul.

I left my- what do I call them- my second? The one I named my successor should I fall. I left them responsible for ensuring our fallen clanmates were returned to Kra-id while I healed in seclusion. Time passed, and when I returned they challenged me for command. As you see, I bested them. I banished them from the clan, but I thought- I believed they had completed their vital duty. I could not find the corpses of dragons on Svartalfheim. Elder’s eyes squeeze shut. I wonder now, if they were ever returned at all.

“What, you think he joined Thanos to take revenge on you?”

It seems… a little self-absorbed, is Tony’s first thought. But hey, what does he know about dragon politics? Elder peers down at him, then looks away.

I doubt it. If they held a grudge against myself specifically, why not bring this hoard of ashen ones to my lair? Why join this- this Titan? Smoke curls out of Elder’s flared nostrils. If this is The Banished’s doing- we cannot know their motivations without being told. I- You will need our aid to fight these abominations. I will call for a gathering of the clan. Tell your queen we await her summons in accordance with the treaties.

Elder dismisses Tony shortly after that. The last Tony sees of the dragon is Elder launching himself into space, off to do what he feels he must.

Like a faithful hound, Tony immediately returns to Frigga and relates what he’s learned. This results in Frigga commanding her einherjar to bring out the nearly-forgotten dragon-hunting gear sets from their dark, dusty vaults. Elder’s assurance that the living dragons will aid Asgard is nice and all, but- no one likes feeling helpless.

All the while, Loki and Tony somehow split their attention between preparing to defend their home, and going to collect their banished son.

Jormungandr, as it turns out, is impervious to curses. Sleeping spells, binding spells, wasting curses- all of them. A blessing, one might say. Sure, but it’s the whole reason Loki couldn’t help Jormungandr transition. Shape changes enacted by an outside force count as a curse, to whatever ‘gift’ Jor has. Snake and the Aesir body he was born with are the only two forms Jormungandr can take, last Loki was aware.

Beyond that misfortune, this also means they can’t just zap him still and teleport him away. They’ll need to trap him with a good old fashioned net.

Tony takes a week to make a net big enough and strong enough to catch Loki’s banished son. It’s another day before they can slip away, riding the Bifrost to the tropics of Midgard.

Loki locates Jormungandr immediately, just as he had all those years ago, when they first visited the vikings together. Unlike last time, however, Loki refuses to keep his distance.

They dive into the water- Tony in a modified suit of armor, and Loki shapeshifted to some aquatic creature with fins like wings. Between them hangs the net- furled up precisely so that a single tug of a rope will snap the massive thing open. From there, they’ll have one shot.
“How’re we holding up, Jay?”

The armor Tony wears wasn’t originally designed for underwater use, but Tony is resourceful. Anything can be waterproofed with enough determination. Magic helps, too. Just a bit.

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“Armor integrity remains at 100%, sir.”

“Fantastic.”

Tony lights the way- blue light, by Loki’s suggestion. As a serpent, Jormungandr can’t see blue or yellow. Whether that’s in keeping with actual snakes or if it’s just a Jor thing, Tony doesn’t know. He simply follows Loki’s instructions. After all, he’s leading this show.

They search the area slowly and methodically. Loki knows where Jormungandr is relative to the rest of the planet, but pinpointing him is a slightly different matter. Finally though, as they pass over a relatively shallow trench, Loki releases the net, leaving Tony to handle it alone. Instead, he beats his fins, cutting through the crystal clear water like a knife through aether. JARVIS highlights a shape in red on the HUD, and now that it’s been pointed out, Tony can recognize the shape as being distinctly serpentine.

Jormungandr shifts in his hidey hole, and the glint of a scarlet eye reflects up at Tony. Loki shoots down to heckle his son up and out of the trench, and Tony’s there and ready. Jormungandr hits the net and thrashes wildly, his massive body- one long line of muscle- whipping around as Tony propels himself through the water to wrap the serpent up. The only thing that stills Jormungandr is Loki.

He shifts back to his Aesir skin, hair floating around him like he’s some kind of siren. Jormungandr’s eyes widen, and then his pupils narrow to slits. Jor jerks in the net as Loki touches his scales, and Tony takes that as his cue.

In a flash of blue, he transports the three of them away- far away. To the ocean taking up a quarter of the dragons’ moon.

Jormungandr disappears into the deep without a second glance once they free him. Loki stands on the jagged, rocky shore. Water drips down from him, but he seems unphased- concerned only with his once-more vanished son.

“I had hoped he might stay, to talk.” A small, bitter huff of air that might have been a laugh escapes Loki. “Although I suppose we did kidnap him.”

Tony puts an arm around him, and Loki leans into the hold.

“He’s safe, though.”

“Yes. As safe as you can be in a place you’ve never known.” Loki’s should dip down as he breathes out heavily. “Perhaps, once this is over, we should become recluses. Scholars. No responsibilities. No politics.” His voice slips out quietly, and so very, utterly exhausted. It’s a nice thought. Build a little tower- a lighthouse, maybe- for Loki’s books and Tony’s workshop. Maybe even here, on the shores of the dragons’ moon. An unlikely thought, but still- Tony indulges in fantasy, for just a moment, and- “We will forfeit Midgard.”

Tony’s thoughts come screeching to a halt. Ideas of a sanctuary crumble away, and he rears back.

“Excuse me?”
Loki bears those two brittle, snapped words, and when Tony drags his arm back, Loki lets him go.

“My mother-” he begins, speaking slowly and deliberately. God fucking dammit. Why beaches? Why is it always beaches? As numb confusion drains away, fire ignites within Tony. “-will forfeit Midgard.” Sharp green eyes meet Tony’s without fear, which- yeah, that’s great and all, but Tony’s still trying to wrap his head around the idea that Frigga is going to abandon Tony’s homeworld to a genocidal maniac. “When Thanos comes, we will not defend it.”

Mouth thin and eyes hard, Tony stares Loki down. Loki’s only response is to lift his sharp chin like some haughty cat.

“That’s why you wanted Jormungandr off-planet.”

“Yes.”

Tony barks out a laugh, the force of the sound stirring an ache in his chest. He glances off to the water. Jor’s refuge. When his attention returns to Loki, his partner seems to be bracing himself. And oh, good fucking idea.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” A moment, and then as Loki opens his mouth to speak again, Tony realizes no, he doesn’t really want to hear it. Whatever fucking reason Loki has, Tony’s hurt, and furious, and- and- and. So many things, so many emotions, some of which have names and some of which don’t. He raises his voice, talking over Loki. “No. Did you think I was going to- what- hold your son over your head? Refuse to- to help you protect him? You know me. You know I’d help you, no matter what.” He leans in. “Loki that was my home. My first home. I deserved to know as soon as you did.”

For a moment, Loki is blank. Then, he shifts his weight slightly forward to match Tony, and a sneer mars his face.

“Why should you chastise me? You are hardly innocent of keeping secrets at Mother’s behest,” he spits, and Tony’s head bobs along, jaw tight. Fair. Fair, and something they’ve never actually addressed. Glass houses and stones and that sort of thing. Loki takes a harsh breath, and just like that, it’s swept under the rug again to fester another hundred years. As deeply as they love and trust each other- They have issues, okay? Some of which they ignore until the pot bubbles over like this. “As you say- I know you. But Tony, that is not your world.” Green eyes search Tony’s face. “Asgard is. Protect your home. You are not Midgard’s defender.”

Pretty words, but there’re still millions of people unaware and unable to do a goddamn thing about their impending destruction. Hardly the billions Tony failed to save, but still. So, so many people, most of whom are completely innocent.

“There are people there, Lo. With families. With children.” He opens his arms, baring himself. “That doesn’t bother you?”

Silence stretches thin, and no answer comes. Loki won’t say a word, and frankly? That pisses Tony off more. Fine. Y’know what? Fine. Tony snaps out a hand, refusing to look directly at Loki. Loki’s eyes narrow, and Tony wriggles his fingers briskly.

“You wanna ride home or not?”

Tony does his best to make absolutely clear through his clipped tone that he isn’t thrilled. No way, no how. But Loki simply thins his lips, and touches his cool, tapered fingers to Tony’s palm. With one parting look to the rippling sea, Tony flashes them away in a burst of blue.
They arrive home in Tony’s workshop, and while the monkeys all immediately clamor for attention, Tony ignores them. Instead, he blasts past them, leaving Loki to linger behind.

An encompassing warmth wraps around his arm, spreading from the buckled leather vambrace, and Tony growls, “Not now, J.”

A gold mist coalesces beside Tony, but he doesn’t slow down to wait for JARVIS to come fully together. It’s fine. Once JARVIS is out of his stone, they have to find a limit on how far he can go. They haven’t tried stretching the distance to interplanetary lengths- and if Tony has a say in the matter, they never will. Why risk it, unless there’s no other option?

“Sir,” JARVIS calls from behind him. The dull pat-a-pat of his shoes smacking against the ground reach Tony as the construct jogs to catch up, and moments later JARVIS joins him at his side. “Will you speak to me?”

“About what? You already forgot?” A sharp noise catches in Tony’s throat. “It’s been ten minutes, tops.”

Demanding fingers close around Tony’s bicep, dragging him to a halt. He swings around to face JARVIS, squaring up like he’s preparing for a brawl. JARVIS releases him immediately.

“I believe you may need a moment to calm yourself.”

A laugh barks out of Tony’s chest. “Calm myself? Are you fucking kidding me?” He steps towards JARVIS, but JARVIS- ever trusting- holds his ground without so much as a flinch. His inkstain eyes meet Tony’s without reservation. A muscle jumps in Tony’s jaw, and he makes an abortive motion, reaching out to touch JARVIS’s chest, pulling back in indecisiveness, and finally following through. JARVIS is warm and solid, and Tony does no more than rest his hand against the plane of his chest- a single point of contact. “You were there, J. The first time.” Tony deflates. “I can’t fail them again.”

He isn’t human, anymore. This isn’t even his Midgard. And yet- And yet. That little blue ball was the first home he’d ever known, in another universe. Can he really be expected to stand back and watch it die? Especially now. Now that he’s so much stronger. Now that he holds magic at his fingertips. Now that he already knows what’s coming?

Inhumanly warm arms wrap around Tony, crushing him to JARVIS’s chest. Tony wriggles away, doing his honest best to slip free, but JARVIS clings like an octopus.

“Get off me, JARVIS,” Tony grumbles.

“I will.” Artificial breath ruffles the unruly locks atop Tony’s head. “First, you must calm yourself. I believe this situation requires a level head.”

He could- He honestly could pick a fight with JARVIS. Trade blows, scare him off. Tony isn’t in any sort of mood to entertain, but to be perfectly truthful? He won’t raise a hand against JARVIS. Not his JARVIS. That would be like- like- like hitting a kid, grown or not. Hitting his kid. And Tony won’t ever be that kind of man. Tony leans against him, forehead mashed to JARVIS’s chest.

“I hate you sometimes,” Tony mumbles. “Why do you always have to be so rational?”

“One of us must be.” The lack of a heartbeat has long since ceased being unsettling. Tony swallows thickly, and JARVIS’s arms loosen- just a hair. Tony doesn’t take advantage of this allowance. Not yet. “Will you please leave this matter for an hour?”
“I should,” he admits.

He really, really should. That would- That would be the smart thing. Take an hour. Order his thoughts. Cool down. Maybe even go settle things with Loki. That would be good, right? They could actually fucking talk, rather than scream in each other’s faces. JARVIS drops his arms slowly, cautiously. His hands linger on Tony’s shoulders for a moment, but he does let go.

Tony’s nails catch on the clipped scruff of his beard, and he drags his hand up and through his own tousled hair, mussing the locks further. He must look a sight.

“Will you talk to me now?”

He looks down at the floor, chewing on the side of his cheek. He fiddles with the vambrace, loosening the clasps as he turns the matter over in his mind. JARVIS is the rational one. He has the most sensible ideas. Tony should listen. That would be best.

Unfortunately, Tony doesn’t want to be sensible. Not now. Not in this. His head jerks up, and he meets JARVIS’s eyes.

“I’d rather go in hot.”

The vambrace drops to the ground, and Tony pops away in the flash of blue he’s never really figured out how to mute. JARVIS’s sad eyes burn Tony to the core, but he’ll handle that later.

When Tony finds Frigga, she’s sitting in her weaving room. The tapestries are all grey and dull, their threads hanging down in tangled masses. A polished shuttle rests in her hand, but the floor loom bears only a half-finished sheet of white, and she makes no move to add onto it. No one attends her, but someone could well be waiting outside the closed door. Tony wouldn’t know. He zapped himself straight to the balcony.

Frigga notices him immediately. She sets the dark shuttle on the loom’s frame.

“Hello, Tony,” she greets, voice distant. Her eyes, however, are sharp.

Tony stares for a moment. Just- takes her in. The delicate blonde curls. The kind blue eyes. Those hands that have held his, and in just a touch, made him promises Maria failed to keep. He leans against one of the arches, and pushes aside the gauzy drape, letting it fall back in place behind him.

“Why are you abandoning Midgard?”

“Loki told you.”

She says it so simply, like it was always a given that the secret would come out. And of course, it would have. One way or another. Tony would have heard about Midgard’s impending doom somehow. From the mouth of a stranger would have been worse than this. But to know immediately would have been better. If he thinks about it too hard, he knows full well he has no right to feel so up in arms about being kept in the dark. About the deaths of millions? Yes. He’ll dig his heels in and kick up a massive fuss, but he shouldn’t be allowed to be angry over Loki doing to him exactly what he did to Loki so many years ago.

Still. It hurts.

“Uh- yeah. He did. About a week too late, but yeah.” Tony’s eyes are flat and hard as he holds her gaze.
She nods, and rises to her feet in one fluid motion. The simple silver of her dress glimmers like stardust. She clasps her hands behind her back.

“My word is final. I know- that you do not like this. You do not need to.” Frigga maintains a porcelain mask of calm. Whatever she’s feeling beneath- sadness or neutrality or anxiety or what the fuck ever- Tony can’t read it. “I cannot make decisions for the approval of one son.”

“I get that. I do.” Tony- yeah. She’s got a whole kingdom of people to care for. The population of a planet crammed onto one surviving chunk- a slice of what Asgard was eons ago. “But it’s- It isn’t just- me. You know that.” He searchers her face. “You’re throwing away a planet. All the life there. A few hundred million people.”

“Two hundred and fifty million,” she answers steadily. “According to our last estimate, at least.” She reaches out, and gingerly rests the tips of her fingers on the loom. “Do you know how many occupy the rest of the Nine?” She waits for just a beat, but Tony knows the question is not one she expects him to answer. “Eight times that. Two billion people, on five realms. Two billion people. And I, their Allmother. I, the queen not only of Asgard, but of all realms. I- who they look to for guidance. For protection.” Her throat works as she swallows, but otherwise she remains still. “I must make choices. Difficult ones. Midgard cannot help us in fighting Thanos, and we cannot risk losing soldiers to protect a planet that cannot protect us.”

“So what. You’re just going to abandon them because they aren’t useful to you?”

He pushes off the arch and steps towards her, stopping about halfway across the room. For a long, painful span of seconds, she says nothing. And then slowly, deliberately, she replies:

“Yes.”

Politics. Fucking- He sucks in a breath and lets it hiss out between clenched teeth.

“You’re sure that’s where you want to go. You’re sure- You’re sure that this is the right choice?”

Because Tony sure as fuck doesn’t. He wants to take Frigga by the shoulders and shake her, scream his fucking head off until she sees what this is going to do to him. See exactly what in him this will shatter- the death of the world he’s already failed once to protect.

Her lips part as if to speak, but she hesitates, the words sticking in her throat. Then, she draws herself up, straight as a blade.

“From the day of my birth, I have seen the scaffolding built for us when Time began. I have known the intentions of the Norns, and the paths they set for us. And yet, I have not interfered. I have not tried to change destinies, though at times everything in me screamed to do so. I have always been certain of the future. I have always known what was to come. And then you came.” Her nails dig crescents into the loom. “Everything shattered, the moment you arrived, although at the time I did not know to blame you. But for a moment-” She pauses, and then- “for a moment I felt hope. As the tapestries I once wove fell to ruin, I hoped I could save my family from the fate I knew would come for them. But I am blind. I cannot see that which I once knew without question, and I have no one and nothing to guide me.”

Frigga glances away, to the tangled matts of thread dangling from the walls. She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear, her hand completely steady.

“So no. I am not certain. And yet, I must make choices anyways. In this, I have decided to sacrifice one realm for the sake of those remaining. To allow us a scrap more of time.” Her eyes flick back
to Tony’s. “I don’t have time to be sorry.”

Tony’s heart pounds in his chest, thumping against the reactor like it’s trying to escape. He can hear it thundering in his ears, the blood echoing like a river in a cavern.

“You’re asking me to watch my first home die.”

“I ask nothing of you.” Her expression cools. “In truth, I ask nothing but this: will you die for them?” The question lingers like incense smoke, heavy and cloying. “Will you cast yourself into nothingness— one man against an army— for the sake of a planet no longer your own? Or will you stay, to protect the family you have now?” She casts up a dismissive hand. “I have made my decision, and now I free you to make yours. If you wish to lay your titles at my feet, I will not stop you.”

Tony digs his nails into his palms, face blank. He— considers it. He really, truly does. And the— shame. For many reasons, really. Shame for how genuinely he considers leaving Loki and Sleipnir and Unnur and Fenris to care for themselves, and fucking off to die like he knows he should have so long ago. Shame for how easily he gives up two hundred and fifty million people. Shame for how fucking selfish he is, that he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that he won’t— he can’t leave behind the best people of his life, and do the right goddamn thing. The moral thing. The thing that doesn’t involve leaving humanity for dead.

“You can be a real manipulative bitch, y’know that?” Tony growls, and a tiny, brittle smile reaches Frigga’s mouth at the first insult he’s ever directed towards her.

“As I said,” she repeats. “I don’t have time to be sorry.”

A sharp knock at the ornate door derails any further conversation. Frigga’s attention lingers on Tony for a long, painful moment, but she turns her head towards the door.

“Enter.”

On of Eir’s nurses— identified solely by her uniform— makes her presence known. She flicks her eyes to Tony for a moment, but when Frigga’s silence drags on expectantly, she dips her head in a tiny little bow.

“Your majesty, you are needed” she murmurs. A beat, and she wets her lips before gravely adding, “Lady Eir believes it is time.”

Frigga closes her eyes. When they open again, that mask is right back in place. Tony watches her carefully.

“Another secret?”

She gestures for Tony to join her as she follows the nurse out the door, but otherwise ignores him.

“Send for my sons.”

“Of course.”

Tony trots along behind her, ice still settled harshly in his chest. A numbness— an apathy. There’s nothing he can do. Two hundred and fifty million people. Frigga, however, ignores his turmoil.

“Odin,” she states very, very briefly, when they enter a stretch of empty hallway. Tony waits for her to elaborate, but she does no such thing. Instead, she surges on like she’s dragging weights
behind her. Tony can take a hint, and he doesn’t press.

The path they follow rings bells. Their destination is probably the only place in the palace with one route to it. One way in. One way out. Extremely defensible. An empty golden room with a bed like an ornate, gilded boat in the center. Odin stands huddled against the far wall, Eir beside him with a hand on his arm. He’s gaunt and frail—skin and bones and patchy hair. He seems not to notice their entrance, but Eir glances their way, her face grim.

“What- Jesus, what happened to him?”

Tony can’t tear his eyes away from the man mumbling to himself against the wall. Okay, so- true. He hasn’t exactly gone to visit Odin since that whole ‘Mercel Commits Treason’ debacle. It’s just—Last he saw Odin, he was completely unhinged, but not broken. Not—this. Frigga does not look away from her fragile husband as she speaks.

“Time.”

As Eir and Frigga explain together, Odin has been fighting Odinsleep for the past century. They’ve been trying to let him go under on his own terms, but now the choice is to induce the sleep, or watch him die.

“So why not let him die?”

“Loki,” Thor hisses, but Loki merely maintains his mother’s gaze.

“My son,” she murmurs. “Would it truly bring you such joy to see him dead?”

Loki tips his hand side to side.

“It would hardly bring me great sadness.”

“He is our father,” Thor protests, but no heat accompanies his words. His eyes flick down, then back up, and he heaves a sigh. “And—beyond that. Our people would see it as a dark omen.”

“Their mad king dead, before any blood is spilled.” Loki laughs, the sound hollow. “So we are to string him along? Display him like a banner?”

“Politics aside,” Eir interjects. Disapproval drips from her voice, though she doesn’t explicitly call them out. “Short of murdering him outright, this will be kindest.” She gently guides Odin, helping the shadow of a man shuffle across the room. She shoots Frigga a sharp glare, which Frigga bears stoically. “Inducing the Odinsleep will save him, in theory. However. We have no guarantee. He may still die, but in this way—it will be peaceful, not pained.” Odin’s milky eyes focus on nothing, empty and blank. “I am sure we can agree that this is our primary concern.”

There isn’t really—isn’t really a tasteful way to respond to that. And—yes. Tony agrees. Now, at least. Back when he was letting Baldur rape Loki on the regular? Submitting Loki away to inhumane tortures and punishments? Tony would have happily let him suffer. No qualms.

But Odin is a broken man. Time and whatever strange curses Mercel used to fracture his mind have left him dead on his feet. He isn’t—Odin. He’s a shadow. An uncomprehending, empty vessel.

“That does not look like the man in the paintings,” Fenris whispers. “He is truly Grandsire’s father?”

Gudrun shushes her son, but the boy looks up at Loki, curiosity and confusion on his face. No
one’s really sat him down to explain Loki’s especially complicated family history. He’s- young. Innocent. And Loki’s history with Odin- from the kidnapping onward- is not. For the moment, all Fenris really knows is that Odin and Loki ended as enemies. There really isn’t a way to give him a sanitized version without misconstruing things, and Sleipnir wants to hold out a few more years before being completely open.

“In a sense,” Loki allows, voice brittle. His eyes flick over to Tony, before returning sharply to his mother. He toys with the ring on his finger, catching the little pieces of embedded shrapnel against the nail of his thumb. “Why are we here?” This, he directs to Frigga and Eir. “You hardly need us to set him to rest.”

“We thought you might like to say goodbye. Given the possibility of his death.” Frigga’s voice remains neutral.

“None of us save you have visited him before now. Why would we wish to say goodbye?”

The queen dips her head in acknowledgment. Behind her, Eir gingerly helps Odin into the thick blankets of his bed. He goes down like a posable doll, utterly unresisting.

“I do not require this of you. I merely thought the chance would- That I should not deprive any of you of this opportunity.”

Tony- he honestly considers bowing out. He does. He doesn’t want to be here, in an emotionally tense situation involving two of the three people he’s just picked fights with. When Thor quietly announces something about the formality ‘being Odin’s due’ and steps forward, Tony steps back. Fenrir watches him with wide, confused eyes as Tony slips back towards the door, but it’s Loki that really gives Tony pause.

What’s new there?

He spares Tony the briefest of glances. Just a split second of eye contact, but his mouth thins, and resignation flickers across his face. That’s all Tony gets, but the acceptance- no confusion, no resentment, just- acceptance, like Tony walking away was always inevitable- coats his feet in lead.

God damnit.

With Thor kneeling beside Odin, holding his hand, Tony stands frozen what feels like miles away. Locked in place. On the verge of a choice. This moment- this whole situation has nothing to do with him. Odin has never been anything but his enemy. By all logical rights, he ought to go.

Instead, he drags himself closer again, situating himself at Loki’s shoulder. Not touching. Not talking. Just- there. He’s pissed, okay? Still so unbelievably pissed, and hurt and other things besides. On top of that, he’s exhausted, and stressed, and suffering from one bizarre case of emotional whiplash.

But- He flexes his hands to feel the joins pull, twists his wrist to feel it pop. Okay, this is his family. ‘Pick your battles’ has never been advice Tony placed much stock in, but this- he’s got a family. He can’t make some stupid moral stand and leave them to fend for themselves. He can’t back out now, just because he’s hurting. And more to the particular moment, he can’t back out now, because doing so would leave his partner to face Odin’s ghost alone.

Loki doesn’t outwardly respond to Tony’s little shuffle closer. Instead, he guides his family forward. One by one, Sleipnir, Gudrun, and Fenris all take turns holding Odin’s hand, and while milky eyes track their movement, Odin doesn’t actually respond. Then, it’s Loki’s turn.
He takes Odin’s hand like he’s holding something tainted—something caustic. He lingers for a moment’s beat, and then his mouth ticks up in a razor-thin smile.

“Rest well, you wretched beast. This day or another, you cannot escape my daughter.”

Hardly Thor’s intimate goodbye, but hey, it’s all Odin really deserves from Loki. Even now. Loki’s condemnation garners no response from the rest of his family. A high, rattling sound escapes Odin like pathetic wind whistling through a crack in a wall, and Loki drops his hand, rising to his feet again. Tony waits for Loki to step away, but instead, the prince gestures for Tony to join him. The smile vanishes from Loki’s face, replaced by careful neutrality mimicking Frigga’s.

Tony gingerly crouches down at Loki’s feet, and he too takes Odin’s limp hand. It’s already cold, and the skin is thin as paper. Tony feels like he’s touching a corpse. A corpse that’s staring at him with clouded eyes. He swallows around the lump in his throat, unsure of what exactly he’s expected to say. Despite approving of the mercy being shown to Odin, he has no kind words for the kind. So instead, he repeats Loki.

“Oh. Rest well, Odin.”

He pats Odin’s hand, and gently sets the withered thing back on Odin’s chest. Except—Odin twists his hand, latching his boney fingers around Tony’s wrist with shocking strength. Tony freezes, eyes flicking up to Frigga and Eir. He doesn’t—doesn’t want to pull too hard. To hurt Odin. But this is weird, and creepy. Like that grabby hand thing in Harry Potter.

Odin’s lips part, and after another forced, whistley sound from his throat, he manages to hiss, “You— are a ship—unmoored.”

Spittle flecks Odin’s beard as he speaks, the words drawn out and slurred like he’s had a stroke. Blunt, ragged nails dig into Tony’s skin, but Frigga appears beside him. Her gentle fingers pry Odin’s grip from Tony, and he falls back on his ass in his haste to distance himself.

“What does he mean?” Loki inquires, his voice quiet but impossible to miss in the chamber’s silence.

Tony shifts to look up at him, cocking his brow. He holds up a hand, and despite a moment’s hesitation, Loki helps him to his feet.

“How should I know? Nothing he says makes any sense.”

Loki’s lips thin, but he lets the matter lie. For a moment. He does not, however, release Tony’s hand, and y’know what? Tony doesn’t feel inclined to change that.

Frigga leans over Odin and presses a kiss to his forehead. A strangled, raspy imitation of her name scratches out of Odin, and she smooths a hand over his hair.

“Sleep well.” She positions his hands over his chest and lingers for several long, long moments. “You have not deserved it, but to you, I have been true.”

The final one to say goodbye is Eir, although she does not speak so much as lift Odin’s head and carefully tip something into his mouth. Something—not liquid. More like a thick fog, flowing like water and yet nowhere near as dense. Odin does not swallow. Instead, he inhales in shallow, spaced-out gasps until the mist is gone. And then, seconds later, his eyes slip shut.

Frigga activates the golden shielding around Odin’s bed, and just like that, the king is sealed away.
The official story is that Odin entered Odinsleep on his own, and everyone accepts this to be true. After all, it’s a regular occurrence. A normal thing. Only the Council knows that the sleep is induced, and they all keep their mouths shut on the matter.

Time marches on. Tony mends things with JARVIS, who never could hold a genuine grudge against Tony no matter how his maker wronged him. Negotiations are finalized. When the time comes, the remaining Realms will join forces on Asgard for one massive stand in the hopes of keeping Thanos and his army away from their civilian populations of nearly two billion people. Frigga volunteers Asgard- being relatively sparsely populated and by far more easily defended- as the battlegrounds. There’s talk of evacuating anyone unable to fight or otherwise contribute to war, but the general consensus is this: if Asgard falls- if the combined armies of five Realms fail- it won’t matter if civilians flee to other Realms.

When Thanos comes for Midgard, Tony sits beside Loki to watch it burn. Months later, and they have yet to revisit the argument born out on a rocky beach of Kra-id, but you know what? That’s fine. Fine by Tony. Maybe once things work out one way or the other, they’ll finally air out all the grievances they hoard like shameful scrap. All the things that slip to the backburner, deemed momentarily less important than the literal war at hand.

The quiet, distant death comes to them courtesy of the sentinel stones placed in the asteroid belt beyond Mars. Tony goes over the footage again and again- Not the slow approach, or the encirclement of a defenseless planet. Not the indistinct dive of ships into the atmosphere, bearing countless ruthless soldiers and armored beasts. No, what he watches is a silent flash. A ripple through space. The slow, deliberate splitting of Midgard plays out again and again. Stripping life from the surface. Casting water into the abyss. Peeling back layer upon layer of stone, until finally the raw, cooling core is exposed to space.

It’s an excessive show of force, and one that Tony believes Thanos wanted to be seen. Shortly after the core cools to solid black, every single sentinel stone goes offline. They lose their eyes on Midgard, and thus their eyes on Thanos. Frigga calls a Council Meeting to go over their state of affairs, and this time officials from Vanaheim, Jotunheim, Alfheim, and Muspelheim join them as well.

Next on Thanos’s predicted path is Nidavellir- a planet of poisoned waters and drifting ice. From what Tony understands, Nidavellir died a long, long time ago, back when the Nine weren’t too advanced for nuclear weaponry. So yeah. Not a loss.

Except- Thanos stops adhering to his predicted path. Yeah, he takes Nidavellir, but he also comes for Jotunheim long, long before everyone imagined he would.

They learn of this from a message delivered directly to Loki, even as she and Tony tap into a sentinel stone to observe Nidavellir’s destruction. A faceted sphere of ice flickers to life before Tony’s partner, and when Loki cracks it open to reach the message inside, her face loses what little color it had to begin with.

“Bring this to Mother,” Loki commands. “I must go to the Bifrost.”

She vanishes in a wash of green, leaving Tony with a thick, smooth roll of white animal skin, stained in maroon blood and hastily scrawled upon. He doesn’t take the time to read it, instead flashing directly to Frigga. The queenvanishes the message, and she closes her eyes for the briefest of moments, shoulders sagging just slightly before she stiffens her posture, snaps her eyes open, and begins snapping orders summoning warriors and healers to the Bifrost. She drops the skin on her table and begins striding away, but Tony catches her by the elbow.
“I can get there faster.”

When they arrive at the Bifrost oculus, JARVIS shimmers into existence to help however he can. Jotuns pour through the open portals, and are immediately guided out and down the rainbow bridge to the city proper. They’re all- none of them are soldiers. They’re all parents clinging to their trembling children, and children helping their elderly along. And they just- keep coming, and coming, and coming, until finally a small trickle of soldiers- fifteen people- limp through the portal, followed up by Helblindi- heavily bleeding. Frigga orders Heimdall to close the Bifrost, and she lingers there in the center of the room, eyes searching Helblindi’s hunched form. After a moment, she steps forwards, joining Loki in helping the giant over to sit against the rounded wall.

Like with the other soldiers requiring immediate care, two healers immediately flank Helblindi, joined by Loki and Frigga. Tony- is pretty goddamn useless. Healing magic has never been his- his thing. He does, however, draw closer- just enough to touch Loki’s shoulder. Loki summons a bucket- because it really is just that, a bucket- of water, which Helblindi takes with grace Tony wouldn’t expect from a man sitting in a puddle of blood.

“Thank you, dear sister,” Helblindi whispers. One swallow is all he needs to empty the bucket, and Loki replenishes it immediately.

“Prince Helblindi-” Frigga begins with gentle firmness, but Helblindi holds up a hand to stop her, before letting it drop back to his lap.

“King.” The single word is simple, but Tony feels Loki’s muscles tense beneath his hand. “Your Highness, we that you see are all that remain. If not now, then soon. I- ah!” Helblindi slams his head back, denting the gold of the wall as one of the healers pulls what looks like a tangle of barbs from a wound beneath his ribs. The Jotun’s chest heaves, but he grits his teeth and looks down to them again. He swallows visibly. “I must- beg. Beg sanctuary for my people.”

Frigga hesitates for only a few seconds before inclining her head.

“Of course.”

The story unfolds, dropping from Helblindi’s lips like shattered stone. A sudden, unexpected invasion, sweeping aside everything the Jotuns had prepared in defense. The scramble to resist, and then- when resistance proved useless- the scramble to save those they could. Laufey had commanded the priests of his capital city’s central temple to open a forbidden portal- a natural slipstream leading to the surface of their moon- the one good eye of their god Lot. They ushered as many people as they could through to temporary safety, because of course, it was only a matter of time before Thanos realized where they had gone. Frigga prods gently but firmly, asking after Helblindi’s- and therefore Loki’s- parents.

“They sent me ahead,” Helblindi explains, voice thick with grief. “To protect- our people. And then- they tore the temple apart, and stranded themselves. To buy us time.” He shakes his head and looks to the side, to the golden city of Asgard. “They died honorably.”

Loki scrubs a hand over her face, smearing a streak of her brother’s blood across white skin. Her breathing is carefully even.

“Thank you, your majesty.” Frigga rests her hand briefly on Helblindi’s shin before rising to her feet. Blood streaks her skirt. “I will send transportation for you and your injured. I-” She cuts herself off, and takes a step closer. Helblindi looks down at her, and she again reaches out to lay a hand on Helblindi’s arm. “My heart grieves with you, Helblindi. We will not let your family remain unavenged.”
When Helblindi and his injured soldiers find their way into Eir’s domain, Loki finally takes a moment to breathe. The tears in her eyes don’t yet fall, but it’s a damn near thing. She does not seek Tony out, but when Tony goes to her she sinks into his embrace, clinging to him like a lifeline.

“I had not realized how much I came to love them until I learned I would never see them again.”

Tony has nothing he can say to that. He simply rests his cheek against her hair, and holds her all the more tightly. Before long, though, Tony feels the tingle of Loki’s magic wrapping around them, pulling them through space to their room. When she pulls at Tony’s vest and tunic, he lets them come off without resistance, and when her lips find his with frantic force, he doesn’t mention the salt on her face. Sex is- it fixes nothing. It’s a distraction. A fun one, but still. A distraction is only that, but Tony understands. Sometimes a distraction is all they can manage.

The official headcount, when it emerges less than a day after Loki opened the Bifrost, is four hundred and twenty-three refugees. Four hundred and twenty-three, out of nearly five hundred million. When Helblindi recovers he gives a full report to the Council and gathered delegates. The mystery of how Thanos managed to reach Jotunheim without alerting anyone remains just that, despite Helblindi’s description of a massive black-ringed hole ripping through the sky and spewing out battleships and war animals. Frigga slams her hands on the table.

“We cannot defend against what we do not know. Find answers, and do so quickly. We are running out of time.”

With his shield project complete, Tony throws himself into helping find accommodations for the refugees while Loki dives into research. Alfheim falls mere weeks later without so much as a whisper of warning, leaving the three delegates on Asgard as the last of their species. People grow restless. People grow scared.

And Morgan? Morgan finds answers. Deep in the ancient libraries of Asgard, Frigga’s former mentor discovers an old, crumbling map. Assumed outdated and therefore ignored for centuries, that map proves to be key.

Midgard was named such for a reason. Modern inhabitants of the Nine assumed Midgard’s removal from the center of the Nine was due to the expansion of the universe and the movement of galaxies. The Ancients, however. The first. They had a reason, when they named Midgard.

“The core can be removed,” Morgan explains, manipulating the golden projected map as the Council and delegates crowd Frigga’s war room- its location now altered to accommodate their much larger allies. She gingerly sets down the mounted map, and with a flick of her wrist peels away a copy. The lines and symbols of the crumbling map part ways with the rest of the copy and drift over towards the projection of Midgard as it was last seen- stripped of its crust and mantle. They shrink and rotate before settling on the bared orb like glimmering ribbon. “And then activated.” She glances to Frigga. The queen’s hard eyes remain locked on the projection. “Whosoever holds Midgard, holds the key.”

“To the Nine?” one of the elves clarifies. Her red-rimmed eyes reflect the projected light.

Morgan shakes her head, and uses her wrinkled hands to spin Midgard’s core.

“To everything. Midgard-” She pauses, letting her words sink in. “Midgard is the center.”

“The universe has no center,” Frigga replies, voice flat. “It is without end, and therefore without a middle.”
Silence stretches heavy as a blanket of lead. One of the dwarven delegates pipes up.

“Yggdrasil has a center.”

“Yggdrasil lies beyond our plane,” Frigga snaps. Her stoic mask cracks.

*You’re sure that this is the right choice?*

Tony can just about hear his own words echoing in the room, but Frigga doesn’t spare him a glance.

“And yet- Our plane lies within Yggdrasil. To which Thanos now holds the key.”

Morgan’s words are bizarrely gentle, given their weight. Frigga summons the projection to herself, and she holds it like a fragile bird, turning the deadened core within her hands.

“Will we be so easily defeated?” one of Helblindi’s advisors wonders. Helblindi himself gestures sharply, slicing the air with one massive hand.

“A key is only of use if there is also a door,” the young king argues. “It is not a weapon in and of itself. And we are here. Waiting, on the other side of that door. We are all of us races of warriors. We will not lay down and die because our adversary can now open *doors*.”

The projection flickers out, and Frigga murmurs, “What, then, shall we do?”

She speaks to no one, and no one answers. But she needs only a moment, before she looks up sharply again.

“Morgan, Prince Durinn- send word to your people. They must evacuate Muspelheim and Vanaheim. We do not know which of our realms Thanos will strike next, and Asgard is the most defensible. Tyr, open the Warrens. See that they are habitable. Go. Work with haste.”

The Bifrost was never meant to transport entire populations, so within days, ships from Vanaheim begin arriving. A flood of displaced people opens up, but somehow overcrowding never becomes an issue. They’re just- guided away from the makeshift docking stations by Asgardian volunteers, and they vanish. Loki brings Tony down to these so-called Warrens to show him exactly why that is.

“According to what history we can find recorded, the Asgard of old was a dying planet. The core cooled before its time and the planet ceased to spin, but the king- one of Odin’s unnamed ancestors- was resourceful.” They descend one of the staircases Tyr unearthed. “They carved the Asgard of Now from the bones of that planet, and within the rocky core created tunnels- catacombs for the living. It was enough to house the planet’s population. We are far fewer now than we ever were then, so the Warrens were abandoned and sealed generations ago- long before even Odin’s grandfather was born.” Loki touches one of the walls. It seems- alive. Veins of water run through the smooth, polished stone- never really falling. Just- moving. Deeper into the Warrens. Glowing balls of white drift near the ceiling like miniature suns. Despite the claustrophobic walls, the space is lit as bright as day. “Thor and I found a forgotten entrance, when we were small. We explored much of the first level in our youth. Well- the first level beneath the city. The Warrens extend beneath all of Asgard.”

For a moment as they wander the bustling, well-lit labyrinth, Tony can imagine they’re- exploring. Just as Loki said. That they’re exploring some strange new place, and doom isn’t ticking closer and closer with every moment. That these countless people settling in aren’t refugees, but settlers.
Up ahead, a machine of some kind lumbers towards them. It’s slow and methodical, but its size is more than a little intimidating. Nearly the size of a bear, with short legs and arms that nearly touch the floor, Tony isn’t sure what to make of it. Neither, evidently, are the people nervously stepping out of its way. It doesn’t pay them any mind, though, and Loki tugs Tony to the side to let it pass.

“What the hell is that?” Tony wonders, baffled.

“One of the Keepers. I believe no one could discover how to inactivate them, so they were left to roam when the Warrens were sealed.” Loki tucks a strand of hair back into place. “I’m nearly certain that they’re the reasons these catacombs have been maintained.”

The Keeper reaches up with its unsettling, articulated arm and adjusts one of the floating lights, before continuing on its ambling way.

“How did I never hear about this?”

Loki shrugs.

“It is ancient history, even for us. Sigyn should arrive here soon. She was always more the ancient scholar than I. Perhaps she will know more.”

It’s amazing, is what it is. Tony wants to learn *everything* about this new facet of Asgard. This new layer of history. He wants to figure out how water runs in rivers along the walls without falling down. What are the glowing orbs? How do the Warrens remain ventilated and cool despite the millions of people inhabiting them? How are the Keepers still functional after untold millennia alone underground?

These questions need time to answer, and time is something they do not have.

Instead, Frigga sends Tony back to the dragons to inform them of the bumped-up time frame. The moon of Kra-id inhabited by the Milky Way’s dragons swarms with activity. Nestlings and fledglings huddle together in communal nests while adults fill the air and prowl through the trees. Tony is deeply glad for his armor. He knows he’s under Elder’s protection, but still. Somewhere deep inside his animal brain, he recognizes that to these magnificent beasts, he’s little more than a snack.

A deep bow and question to the first dragon Tony happens upon points Tony in the direction of a tight formation of pillars looming over the forests several miles to the south, and Tony fires his repulsors, shooting off through the air.

“Thank you, Elder.” The dragon to Elder’s left shifts, lifting their head, and Tony bows. “Hello, Wander. I’m glad to see you well.” Wander inclines their head in acknowledgment, their green crystal horns sparkling in the light, and Tony looks back to Elder.

Words rush from Tony like water from a broken dam. Midgard’s sacrifice, Thanos’s key, the evacuations- everything. Elder’s lips curl back in a beatific snarl, but when Tony falls silent, he lumbers to his feet.

*Tell your queen we shall join her in four day’s time. Keep the fields behind your city clear. We will open a portal there. Be safe, Tony. Be wary.*
True to his word, on the fourth day the air above the fields to Asgard’s rear rips apart like a burst seam, and from this tear spring dragons. With gem-crusted bellies and crystal-jewel horns, they erupt like split light from a prism. Tony does not meet them. He merely watches from afar. From one of Asgard’s towers. Loki and Thor have accompanied their mother to receive these allies alongside Helblindi, Frigga’s parents, and the delegates from Alfheim and Muspelheim, but Tony’s paying back a favor.

Unnur stands with him, watching the dragons converge upon Asgard in the distance. She’s got the fucking goose with her. On a leash. Tony doesn’t comment though. Can’t, really. He’s got Dave on his shoulder too.

They watch in silence for a time, before Tony guides her away from the open wall and back to his workshop. JARVIS emerges to distract the goose, and damn him, the goose behaves. The monkeys, however, do not, but Tony’s learned to ignore them when he really needs to focus and they won’t cooperate.

“You’d be safer in the Warrens,” Tony mumbles as he adjusts the gauntlet on Unnur’s hand.

She flexes her fingers, and the silver metal glints in the light of the forge.

“Idunn can’t leave the garden,” comes the simple reply, just like every other time they’ve had this discussion. “I’m not leaving her.”

Hence, the gauntlets. Nothing fancy, nothing elaborate. He has no time to make her a full suit, let alone train her to use it, but Tony won’t send Unnur away without giving her a way to defend herself. And her girlfriend.

“Frigga plans to station einherjar with her. And they, unlike you, are trained for battle.”

“I’m not leaving her behind, Tony.”

And as with every other time, that’s where Tony lets the matter drop. One final touch, and there. Tony feels no- The usual sense of pride and accomplishment that comes with each new creation never reaches him. Instead, as he steps back to look over Unnur and examine her silver gauntlets for visual defects, he feels sick. Nauseous. She’s going to die, if she goes up against an army. But she’s stubborn, and passionate, and loves Idunn more than her own life. What was Tony supposed to do? Knowingly let her wander off with nothing to defend herself but a sword?

“Clenching your left fist projects a shield,” he explains. “The repulsors themselves are controlled by muscle contractions. Like this.”

Tony lifts his own hand, claws his fingers, and tenses the muscles on the back of his hand. It’s just a twitch, but the combined motions are unlikely to be performed on accident. Unnur copies him. She fails the first few attempts, but her first shot strikes the wall with a searing heat.

He takes no joy in that either.

When Unnur leaves with her goose and her gauntlets, Tony sits on his workbench. He buries his face in his hands and leans back carefully until he’s sprawled across the bench. Blinky jumps up and settles comfortably on top of the reactor, but Tony doesn’t bother moving it. After a few moments, JARVIS runs his fingers through Tony’s hair.

“You are doing all you can,” JARVIS insists quietly.

Tony peaks up at his construct through his fingers.
“Am I, though?”

“Of course. You follow your heart. It has yet to lead you astray.”

He stares at JARVIS with a frown firmly on his mouth, before closing his eyes.

“Keep telling yourself that, bud.”

Tony begins coming across dragons morphed down into their more compact humanoid forms, whenever he has cause to walk through the city. They regard him with shimmering gazes, and Tony bows his head a hair whenever he makes eye contact. Fewer and fewer Asgardians can be found on the surface with each passing day as they begin to filter down to the safety of the Warrens. The comparatively few warships Frigga’s parents were able to bring with them patrol the skies above and below Asgard. They wait. No contact has been made with the dwarves since Frigga’s initial command to evacuate. They fear the worst.

Except- they do arrive. Or, some do. Four ships in total make it to Asgard, bringing news of a trap consuming the rest of the fleet. Three battleships, and one civilian vessel have reached safety. The rest- the entire rest of the dwarven population has met the same fate as the Elves, the Jotuns, and the Midgardians. The shields raise, and the orbiting defense systems activate. Thanos is not far.

Asgard is- it’s strangely quiet, in the face of a siege. Or maybe not so strangely. Tony wouldn’t know. He doesn’t- he isn’t experienced, in this. Even the birds hush up. No children run freely- even Fenris has been sent to the Warren with Gudrun. The market is bare. Tony strongly feels that the sky should be grey and cloudy, rather than the days of perfect, blue-skied sunshine. Maybe he should get Thor on that.

Tony seeks Loki out. They’re waiting for the ax to fall, for the hangman’s push, and it’s- Tony’s anxiety hasn’t been this fucking bad in centuries. Which is normal given the situation, he thinks, but not exactly helpful. Hector helps Tony track down his spouse. As Tony makes to walk into the infirmary Loki walks out, which is- good. Except-

“Are you hurt?” Tony demands, brow creasing as he takes Loki’s hand. Loki freezes for a moment like a deer in headlights.

“Peace, Tony. I am not injured.” He sandwiches his other hand on top of Tony’s, squeezing Tony’s grasping fingers. “I- I was merely visiting Sigyn. Eir is making use of her skills as an herbalist.”

Loki gestures vaguely, and when Tony follows the motion he can indeed see Sigyn- just for a moment- before she passes out of view. But whatever. Screw that. Tony’s anxiety brain just- can’t quite accept there’s nothing wrong. That Loki’s okay.

But he can’t mother-hen, and he shouldn’t micromanage, so- what. What else can he do but nod along and accept Loki’s words as truth? Loki knows him, though, so he lifts Tony’s hand to his lips.

“Truly, love. I’m fine.”

Tony sighs deeply, and he leans up to kiss his spouse.

“That’s- good. Sorry, I’m just- on edge.”

“As am I. We shall be on the edge together, then.”

He snorts, a tiny smile tugging at his lips despite himself.
So yeah. All that’s left is to wait.

When patrolling scouts detect energy waves indicating interspace travel mere days later, the news spreads like wildfire. Tony suits up in seconds, and as the chiming alarm rings out through the city and to the borders beyond, to the outposts and territories rimming Asgard’s disk, the War Council formally convenes.

It’s an impressive sight. Freyja and Skadi act as Frigga’s advisors. Helblindi kneels flanked by two of his own aides. With the deaths of their royal families, the delegates of Alfheim and Muspelheim act as speakers for their people. Miorna, Fjorgynn, and Morgan speak for Vanahelm. Elder and Wander stand for the dragons. The array of armors and chosen weaponry astounds Tony, but he keeps his silence. Thor and Loki, as trained tacticians and true princes, sit in on the War Council as well. Frigga merely allows Tony’s presence because of her fondness for him. Or, that’s what he assumes. No one’s chased him away yet.

Frigga lays out the plan. They’ve been over it before, but now that an army is knocking at their door, it doesn’t hurt to refresh memories.

The dual shields should keep Thanos and his army out indefinitely. Should, being the operative word. If Thanos has things they haven’t seen or heard of from intelligence missions, they’ll need to reevaluate. But for the moment, they expect a siege. The orbital defenses will maintain fire on anything that draws near enough to target, but beyond that they will disengage the shields over a controlled area to allow entry on their terms. They have very few warships, so a genuine space battle is out of the question. They’ll need to pick away at what comes for them. Asgard’s resources, if properly rationed, can provide for her citizens and the millions of refugees besides for a long, long time.

It’s just- the shields must hold.

“We are warriors,” Frigga announces from her pedestal in the center of the room. Her winged helmet- finer than Thor’s, but no less protective- shines a polished gold to match the scale of her sleeves as she turns to regard those gathered. “Beneath our feet, there are millions who cannot defend themselves. Millions, relying on us to protect them. Out there, countless more have been lost.” She raps Gungnir sharply against the pedestal. “Our brothers and sisters and those we loved otherwise. Our children. We here speak for what remains of the Nine. We here stand against a madman who would see these worlds dead. We here- We protect those who need us.”

“We are heroes.”

Frigga looks sharply at Loki, very obviously displeased with his interruption.

“No, my son. We fight for lives. Not glory.”

Loki does not wilt beneath her gaze. Instead, he looks to her, and beyond. To his brother Helblindi. To his grandparents across the way. To those who should have been allies for countless millennia more.

“Then let us redefine a hero. Not as a champion or a legend, but as one humbled. One who sees the worlds beyond themself, and stands to defend the future. One who protects. One who serves. We must be heroes, because in fear and darkness, a hero is what the realms need.”

Silence stretches thin, but they don’t have time for silence. Thor, true to form, shatters that quiet.

“Spoken like a true king,” he murmurs, resting his hand on Loki’s leather-clad shoulder.
“Let us be heroes,” Helblindi agrees after a moment. “And let us prove honorable to the heroes before us.”

Despite herself, Frigga can’t seem to keep the soft, sad smile from her face. She dips her head in acknowledgment.

“All right. The time has come: let us be heroes.”

Chapter End Notes

You won’t be getting the next chapter until I write the first chapter of the next installment as well, so deal with it. Enjoy that damn cliffhanger.

Can anyone guess why the armor’s called Jupiter? Also, fun fact: As I was writing the end of this, I was thinking gee. It’s disappointing that no one caught the tiny easter egg I put in earlier on in this chapter. Then I realized wow. Maybe no one noticed because I haven’t actually published it yet. I’m a genius.

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