Wandering Child

by wanderingchild

Summary

Originally a fill posted at norsekink in response to the prompt:

"After the Avengers capture Loki at the end of the movie, they lock him up as a precaution before shipping him off to Asgard. And being the good guys, they decide to give him the chance to bathe and dress in clean clothes instead of sleeping in his own dirty rags.

The problem is, without the whole battle gear and the drawn and mean look, Loki looks surprisingly young, which prompts the Avengers to ask Thor just how old Loki really is. Of course Loki is centuries old, but Thor tells them that in human standard, Loki would still be considered underage!

Cue to horrified Avengers who wants to know exactly what sort of crappy home life Loki must have had to end up like this before even reaching adulthood."

It rather spiralled from there into a behemoth, now in the process of being edited and hopefully cleaned of glaring plot holes! Updated daily.
Notes

There are a lot of warnings for this fill. I'll add more general warnings to the tags as we go along, including chapter-specific ones in the notes for each. If I miss a warning, I apologise and please let me know what I've overlooked if you're able to.

This fic was controversial on the meme. There was some excellent criticism about how I've handled or not handled or badly handled some of the cultural differences and clashes I've written, and I kept that in mind while editing in preparation for posting to AO3. I've done my best to tackle this appropriately but I can't say I've always been successful. Again, there has been much-appreciated criticism on this score.

All that said, this combines movie, comic and myth canon in a blender, it's very long, and I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoy writing it.
Chapter 1

It started with trying to find Loki some clothes. The armour getup was pretty much ruined at this point, and getting the tesseract calmed down enough for anyone to go near it was taking a while.

Thor wanted them repaired, which, sure, Asgard, whatever, might as well be judged in his best duds. But they had to get them off him, and they had to have stuff for him to put on. Nobody wanted to think about Loki naked. It was like naked flies: it happened, just no thinking about it, because gross.

SHIELD had enough data to inform them of his rough dimensions, but finding someone who matched was harder. Either they were too big or they were too short, and not making him look more ridiculous than he already did in his dented armour really shouldn’t have been that much of a problem.

In the end it was one of the bridge techs, probably the guy playing gallaga, that offered an old, outgrown shirt and a pair of sweats. They looked like they’d fit a kid that’d stretched out like toffee, but after the earlier fiasco SHIELD was very prickly about the accuracy of their tests, and they absolutely insisted they’d fit.

They handed them over to avoid diplomatic incident and gave him a bit of privacy because again, naked Loki was a definite no, but it was kind of startling what they found when they turned back to check he hadn’t used the opportunity to turn everybody into frogs.

That was the thing: without the cape and all the leather and buckles, Loki was tiny. Frail, even, and the points of his collarbones looked about to cut through the shirt.

The camera changed angle when he sat and clasped his hands and from the back he was an hourglass of bone: shoulder, spine, pelvis.

It changed again to a profile view and from the side his features were blade-sharp, his eyes sunken against the edges of his nose and chin. He looked haunted, and weary, and very, very ill. Six cameras in the cell, and they all showed different angles of the same.

“That’s not what I expected,” Clint said, and he sounded startled.

“What, never saw him with his kit off?” Everyone scowled at Tony and he subsided, grumbling. “Come on, he was a minion of evil. It’s a legitimate question.”

“Well, the answer’s no, Stark.”


“What were the measurements again?” Bruce broke in, tactfully diverting their attention before they all started pissing each other off.

“My brother has always been a weak warrior,” Thor said. “He relies on his tricks.”

Bruce nodded. “Yeah, that’s ... not measurements.”

“187 tall,” Natasha read from her screen, on the ball as usual. “They couldn’t get accurate bodyweight with the armour, but the total they calculated off the helicarrier’s pressure plates was 82 kilos.” She compared with the camera, brow furrowing. “That can’t be right.”
“Oh, Nat, don’t --”

“The armour itself, how much?” He ran right over Clint, and that was unusual enough that everyone else was shifting their attention to Bruce and Natasha and how focused they seemed.

“Why does this matter?” Tony complained. “Who cares if he’s not a horny fashion plate?”

Bruce shook his head, and something in his face shut him up. “Natasha?”

“Uh, estimate from the team examining them right now is 18 kilos of armour weight. Bit hard to tell, but that’s what they’ve got.”

Tony blinked. “That’s a bit low. Isn’t it?”

Bruce was leaning all the way over Natasha’s shoulder now, tapping at files and shaking his head.

Clint nudged Thor, who was looking confused at their confusion. “They’re just bitching because they couldn’t take him down.”

“You didn’t either,” Natasha said.

“It was a team effort,” Steve said from the hallway, loping in at a half-jog. He had the look of extremely frustrated politeness that followed all his meetings with Fury. “What’s the problem?”

“The problem is I need a second opinion on these scans,” Bruce said. “Uh, Tony? You ever dabble in anatomy?”

“Yeah,” and he got up, tapping his chest, and leaned over Natasha’s other shoulder; she was beginning to look put-upon. “Why am I looking at a kid’s x-rays?”

Bruce looked sick. “Damn.”

Natasha gave him a considering look, clearly trying to decide if vomit on her shirt was worth the effort of forcibly moving him. “Dr Banner?”

Tony blinked, brain visibly catching up. “Whoa, these are his? That’s -- wait, wait -- can’t be more than 17, lookit those stress fractures. Tail end of a growth spurt, you think?”

“He’s a kid?” Steve said. “How can a kid do that? I was under the impression children were --”

Thor patted their shoulders. “Friends, you need not be concerned. No man of Asgard would do such things.”

Clint looked like he’d swallowed a lemon whole. “Thor, buddy, uh, thing is, we thought he was.”

“I am sorry that so much pain has been caused by a youth,” Thor said, guilty and regal. “But you need not fear. He has done so pretending to the actions of one grown into manhood, and he will be punished as one.”

“What?”

There was a distinct undoctorly wince, and Tony took his heel off Bruce’s instep. “All right, look, let’s not get all worked up. This is SHIELD, and clerical errors? Not beyond them. Let’s get another set done. He’s cooperating, right?”

“Yes,” Steve said. “But if he is a kid --”
“XRAYS FIRST FREAK OUT LATER,” Tony bellowed. “Am the only smart person here? No, don’t answer that, it’s obvious. We’ll get an independent batch, hell, grab a portable one, we’ll do it ourselves, see what’s going on. Hour tops.”

Steve looked like he’d rather be in another meeting with Fury. “Someone has to go with him in case. I’ll do it, but I need a partner.”

“I will,” Natasha said, and efficiently crowded everyone back so she could stand up, ignoring Tony’s wounded hiss. “Ready when you are, Cap.”

“I hope you’re wrong,” Clint said.

Tony grimaced, watching them go. They were hilariously mismatched, but they had teamwork going for them and it wasn’t like SHIELD was going to do any better. “Me too.”
Chapter 2

Loki was frighteningly complacent when they handed him the paper-fabric gown and waited for him to dress, and still more so when they took him from the cell and into a side room hastily cleared so it had only a machine and a long table, guards posted at each corner of the table and the room, guns and tranquilisers at the ready. Very much at the ready. He'd seen their tension around Agent Barton, too, and sometimes Steve couldn't tell which one the SHIELD infantry wanted to hurt more for their actions over the last few days.

"Lie down just there," Bruce said, and looked around. "You both see pretty well in the dark, right?"

"Yes," Natasha said, and moved closer, never interrupting the sight lines around her. "What do you need, doc?"

The guards produced night-vision goggles, covering for one another as they put them on one by one while Loki lay quiet on the table, crawling onto it with a grunt. His nose was still broken.

Steve lingered beside Loki, uncertain what to do or say. He looked like a corpse but for the faint rise of his chest, and his actions reminded Steve too much of the Red Skull to be comfortable on the same base, let alone beside him even muzzled and chained. One genocidal villain was all of them.

But Red Skull had been rageful and bitter and seeking power. Loki's own words had been that he was spreading a truth. An ugly and horrible lie, of course, but the motivation was a little different. Red Skull hadn't believed in anything but everyone else's inadequacy.

It had been simpler then. It felt simpler. They weren't the ones that muzzled their enemies like dogs, they killed those people who dared do that and took satisfaction in avenging the deaths of their friends and protecting their country, and Steve knew even then that wasn't quite true. Not really, not like the world of the newsreels. Sometimes they muzzled their own.

Children fought sometimes too, slipped the tests and went to war, but it was easy to tell and they were kept to supply lines and errands and nurses' assistants. They weren't the figureheads, the ones who led the war. Who had to die for everyone else to feel safe, and even then that hadn't been quite true either. No children in the newsreels to begin with, unless they were cheering a triumphant return, but the newsreels never mentioned how sometimes a lost, crying child could be the best distraction to invade a base otherwise secured.

Sometimes, too, in all this ambiguity there were grown men of fine character and good sense who laid down their arms in defiance of honour and duty to their country for no reason they would give. When pressed they begged tiredness and fatigue and oncoming dysentery, but it was obvious that something in them had broken and left them listless. Loki as he was now reminded Steve of that. A conscience missing, waiting for pain and death like a quisling.

The overall effect was very much as though someone had replaced Loki's eyes with glass. It was singularly uncomfortable.
"It won't hurt," Steve told him.

Loki's gaze shifted one of the guards and held, almost resentful.

"Don't mind them. It's for everyone's peace of mind." Were gods like people that way? He'd been examined by SHIELD doctors, and they'd been brusque but not unkind. "It shouldn't hurt," he said. "Tell us if it does. Uh, tap the table if it does, is that all right?" Banner nodded confirmation.

Loki closed his eyes. Steve supposed that was as good as anything else, and he stared at his pale, incongruously long toes until everything was ready and Banner shooed them out.

The hall was bright and Steve blinked, momentarily dazzled, then noticed Natasha's careful study of the wall, not quite looking at the two guards posted either side of the door, the four at either end of the hallway. That was just the visible security.

The entire base had an air of expectant tension. Most of the personnel here hadn't been involved in New York, had been stationed here as a backup for both the research base and the helicarrier, but they'd heard enough news and seen the lists of civilian funerals for military men to take Loki being alive and on Earth very personally.

Most were like that. Some were more level-headed, and Steve had been relieved to see all the squad leaders he'd passed since they arrived with Loki bound in the hold and delivered to his cell by Thor were of the latter sort and not the former. Hopefully their cool heads would keep everyone in check.

But Romanova was still a little too fixed on the wall.

"Nickel for your thoughts?"

She shook her head. "My opinion. We have to be very careful with Thor."

He hadn't really noticed that Thor was a danger to Loki, but the way she spoke made it sound like he was. "Why? It's his brother we're talking about."

Natasha shifted slightly and focused on a different, identical patch of wall. "He doesn't consider Loki an adult man even though they'll try him with the responsibilities of one. That doesn't bode well."

Steve gave the top of her head a confused look. "Ms Romanova, I won't be offended by whatever it is you're not saying."

"Thor does not consider Loki an adult man," she said again.

Steve puzzled through it. "Oh, I see." He blanched. "I mean -- I'm sorry, I --"

Natasha turned to face him, lips pursed. "Haven't we had this conversation?"

"Er. Yes." It had been very, very awkward. "I'm sorry. So there's more to this than just bones?"

The door opened and Bruce came out, then recoiled at the sight of Natasha, white-faced and retching. "Watch him. 'scuse me."

She gave his fleeing back a grim look. "I believe so."

Natasha turned on the lights inside after a few moments' warning to give the guards time to adjust out of night vision, the rows of dark papers with shadowy spines and thighs meaning very little to Steve. Loki was still exactly where they'd left him.
"It didn't hurt?"

Loki shook his head very faintly, his adam's apple bobbing, and a trail ran from under the muzzle.

"Oh." That was something they hadn't considered, and Steve found a cloth, batting away the worst of the dust. He half-wondered why Natasha wasn't stopping him. "Let me get that." Loki flinched, badly, wild-eyed and holding still as a frightened bird, and Steve tried to be quick as he wiped down his cheek and ear and chin. "There we go."

Loki was staring, exactly as incredulous as Bucky's aunt when she found Steve playing pony to Bucky's knight, and Steve flushed.

"It's polite," he said, defensive and not exactly sure why.

Natasha shook her head and they waited in silence until Banner returned, grey and tired-looking, his smile strained. "Hey, sorry about that."

"Going to tell us what you saw, doc?"

He glanced at Loki, half-smiling. It looked painful. "I've got a lot of questions for Thor, I've gotta tell you." Steve saw Loki stiffen, eyes narrowing in something resembling mingled pride and fear.

Natasha stepped closer, obviously sensing the changed mood. "If you're finished we'll take him back and meet you on the bridge."

"Yeah, you do that." Banner moved to take down the papers, and Steve saw him shudder over an image of ghostly hips like pinned butterflies. "I'm gonna talk to Tony."

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For ... reasons, mostly to do with the fact that Tony's issues around child endangerment were close enough to his that they wouldn't be shouting at cross-purposes, Bruce showed them to him first, tucked in a conference room with enough bulbs and glass for Tony to cannibalise into a decent lightbox.

"So definitely not an adult." Tony tipped his head and squinted as though another angle would change the jags and curves. "I'm just not seeing one here. You see one? Come on, Bruce."

"No."

"Man, I didn't miss these. You know how weird it is? Staring at the inside of your chest? I don't even have a sternum, for fuck's sake, it's like --" His hand scribed an uncomfortable arc. "Everything just sags."

Bruce tapped the arc of the pelvis, the part that was giving him the most trouble. He didn't really know what to do with Tony's honesty. He'd wondered, what medical researcher wouldn't, but asking seemed like a good way to annoy him into taking back that offer of the R&D floors. "What does it change?"

"Better question. What should it? He's got what we could call pregnancy marks if he was a girl, or, you know, claw marks, and he's not --" Tony's face twiched on itself, then smoothed, in the tell-tale
of Tony Stark tasting and dismissing diplomacy. "Exactly one way or the other. I mean, his balls are
doing double duty tucked up like that. Is it even relevant? I mean, he trashed my tower. He killed
people, started a war."

"He's a shapeshifter," Bruce said, mostly ignoring him. Tony was one to talk about starting wars.
"He can choose. It's not like us. He keeps these, they matter to him. Why do these matter?" Whatever
had clawed Loki from the inside out, it was like it woke up and panicked. Why keep that?

"Important to him, yeah, it's not relevant. It's the age thing. I mean, we're looking at somebody who,
you know, could be fourteen. Maybe seventeen if he's ridiculously starved, but we'd see that, right? I
mean, we are seeing it, but -- ah, fuck. Come on, they wouldn't go that far."

They both contemplated the lightbox.

"You know, his first kid, they say it was a horse?"

"That sounds awkward."

"Kinda awkward, yeah. But he was a horse too at the time."

"Wow."

They continued to stare then, as one, shook themselves and looked away uncomfortably.

"So basically we're flying blind here. That's ... that's par for the course, isn't it, I hate this team."

Bruce gathered the papers together and slipped them into a makeshift envelope he'd taped together.
Looking at them any longer felt creepy and invasive. "No, you don't."

"No, but I'm not here for the ambiguous moral choices and, you know, yeah, maybe he is a kid. I
don't care. I need more evidence before I stop being the first one in line to cheer when he gets kicked
back to daddy. You know what I was like when I was fourteen? I was absolutely capable of this shit,
fully aware, sane, everything. I would have just had to want to. It's luck that I didn't, but that's it."

Bruce switched off the lightbox. "You'd have slept with a horse and had its babies?"

There was a long, terrible pause. "See -- see, that would convince me. If it was true."

"Agent Barton's been doing research. Matching up what he remembers with the myths. It wasn't all
one-way, apparently. The mind-control, uh, you called it something funny."

"Blue stick of destiny. He got Loki's backwash from when he brainwashed him for two weeks so
Loki could destroy the world and we're fucking around with xrays?"

"Agent Romanova said, yeah."

"I hate this team. Come on. Gotta rescue Capsicle before they bond or something, oh, no no wait,
you know something. That's a knowing face. It's too late, isn't it? It is. Of course it is. This horse
story had better be epic."

Bruce let him be and took their findings to Agent Barton while Tony did his best Obnoxious to ward
Fury from getting too interested in anything to do with the Avengers ever. (Sometimes Bruce wasn't
sure Tony was faking, and he knew Tony wasn't sure either.)

"Uh, Barton?"
Angry blue eyes. So, so angry, hands flat on a book illustrated with watercolours. "It's true. The details here are wrong, I can't confirm anything, but most of this translation feels true. Take that for what it's worth."

Well.

It just got more and more damming, didn't it?

"I'll tell Tony. Could you do me a favour --"

"You're going to talk to Thor."

"We will. I don't think I could by myself. Can you keep Agent Romanova and Captain out of the way when it happens? Not today, but soon."

"Sure."

Bruce paused. "It's worth a lot. You were compromised. That doesn't make your instincts worthless. And you were compromised by Loki. I don't know how that works, not really, but ... you were there, and you remember ... You do remember feelings, right? This is all feelings. If anyone would have the most insight in this mess, it'd be you."

Barton didn't relax, but something in his gaze lightened almost to boredom, like a lion being bothered by a puppy. "Thanks, doc."
Warning for this chapter: use of the term hermaphrodite, which will continue to be used when it's relevant in the story. I use it factually and without apology because I don't want to use a term for human variation (intersex) to describe someone who is explicitly not human and is not part of that variation (two complete sets of genitals). I feel the distinction is important.

"This isn't what I meant by staying out of the way! Clint, damnit!"

Natasha shook her head. "You knew he would tell me."

"Well, yeah. It's not like you'd believe it from me."

True. "I assume you have a plan," she said, and layered it with precisely as many meanings as she saw fit.

From the pout Stark gave her, he caught enough to know it was an order. Clint smiled at it, however, and Captain Rogers perked up, and those responses were what would cause Tony to start showing off and telling them everything regardless.

He claimed the team was an inconvenience. Tony Stark claimed many things that were only true on alternate Tuesdays.

It was a very Stark plan, overcomplicated and overreliant on his ideas of his own competency. Natasha deigned to prod Captain Rogers to fix it enough of it that her further changes wouldn't completely alienate Stark from doing anything useful.

It was in her assessments, of course. Mewling quim. A very precise, very careful and very Asgardian personal insult following a very precise, very careful detailing of sworn intent. A personal oath between two people who knew one another.

Not personal to her. To him.

Someone had said that to him once, his recital too fluid to be quite word-for-word, and it had stuck.

She considered one thing at a time, and one thing only. The connections splayed of their own accord as she thought, and she was under no obligation to follow any of them.

Otherwise she would become far too sloppy to be useful.


Natasha didn't like the web it made.
"Why can't we just ask him?" Captain Rogers seemed genuinely bewildered. "It seems a bit ... we shouldn't be poking around in his business like this. We already have the radiographs, that's evidence enough for me."

Tony looked at her.

She looked at Clint.

He looked back, then cleared his throat.

"We'd be asking him how many times he'd been raped. Nobody's that honest, Cap."

Captain Rogers flinched at that, and Natasha felt her shoulders ease, tipped her head to Clint. He had his moments.

"You think Thor would tell us? Even though?--" Captain Rogers was very uncomfortable. He leaned his weight on his front foot and twisted his spine in a way more consistent with a wall. It had the markers of unconscious recall, not self-aware flashback. Most likely assaulted as a teenager but had never reconsidered it in those terms.

She pinched it. Irrelevant.

"I think they're alien gods," Tony said. "And he's so nice and affable and we've all been so busy falling over ourselves to help him we haven't figured out that actually means something."

"Time to find out," Natasha said.

"How? We are not using Loki as bait."

Tony grinned. "Steve, Steve, Steve. What do we know about Vikings?"

"Horns?"

"They love rehashing shit. They go over and over every single thing. They make runestones full of 'Hrakson punched Storkson in the face here on this spot in the era of BC fuckit' and leave them up for hundreds of years just to punch all their descendants in the face all over again. We ask, he'll spill." He clapped his shoulder. "Trust me."

"That's the problem," Clint said.

Tony made wounded faces. "Oh, come on."

"We don't know if Thor will punch him in the face that easily," with slow faux-patience. "Geez, it's not all about you."

Yes, Clint had his moments. Stark looked like a ruffled cat, bristling with indignation. "Of course it's about me, stop being metaphorical, he already took a few swings. You didn't see how he took him out the jet, Barton. Practically threw him by the throat."

Clint stared at Captain Rogers for confirmation and scowled when he got it. "Seriously?"

"That was the first time they met after the Bifrost?" Natasha said.

"Uhhh, think so. I had a wire on the guy, Thor was pretty clear he'd thought Loki was dead."

"And he grabbed him by the neck at thirty thousand feet? Did he just not care if he killed him or
Tony twitched, shrugged, and twitched some more. A memory of Howard Stark, most likely. Time to pull elsewhere.

She plucked a thread for the conclusion it reverberated, and said: "Don't give Thor too much credit." It was likely Thor hadn't thought a fall of 30,000 feet would be any danger at all.

"Yeah, like, is he actually going to think of it like ... 'hey, here's some funny shit my little bro did', or is it knowing that he's punching him forever?" He turned resentful eyes on her; Stark, consummate PR rep for his own ego wherever he went, knew exactly what she was doing. Too bad that she hadn't left him room to take back control just yet. "I hate it when people live down to my expectations. It's depressing." Probably the only time she agreed with him on anything. Pity.

"Stop, Tony. We don't know what we're doing. We need to. Loki ... something's wrong with him. He looked like -- it wasn't that he expected me to pistol-whip him. It was that I didn't when I had the chance."

Clint shrugged, minute but enough to break into the conversation.

"Three questions here." He counted off, starting with his thumb. "One, he looks pretty well-grown, but x-rays say he's not. Is he a kid to Asgard peeps or does it just look like that to us? Two, the books say a lot of shit. Is it that everyone in Asgard gets this shit happening because they're gods and bugfuck nuts and it didn't get written down for us, or is the crazy disproportionately on him? Three, what do we do about it? Either way. It's --" He closed his hand, shrugged. "Either we're dealing with a traumatised adult, a just plain crazy guy, a crazy kid, or a traumatised kid."

Tony paced, scratching the reactor. "If this were a democracy we'd all vote but hey, it's not, so let's ... look, he's not resisting. He's not even pulling out the NG tube and let me tell you, those things fucking itch. Treating this like the worst case isn't going to change much anyway. I mean, what's he got? The superchains from their dad, no magic, he can't talk, the little grey aliens are probably really pissed ... if I were him I'd stay right here. Oh, hey, that's exactly what he's doing."

"So far. It changes what we tell Fury," Natasha said.

Clint sucked his teeth. "SHIELD has a policy on child soldiers. It's called don't." He leaned back, feet swinging where he was sitting on the table, boot toes brushing carpet. "I've been here ... ten years, maybe. Never seen one." Trained them, yes, if they were poached or left willingly. Natasha knew that much about Fury's pragmatism. Put them on the field before they were old enough to handle the situation response SHIELD demanded of its employees? No. They didn't need to.

"That's promising," Captain Rogers said. "I don't like how he handled Phase 2 with the Tesseract, but if he can be trusted with this, we can buy time. How long until the Tesseract's ready to go?"

"Selvig said two days. It's still stuck up there, being all blue and annoying. I've got a shitload of stuff built around it so it's contained. Could run into, eh, prototype malfunctions. Whatever. It's not like I've tried to play chicken with a cosmic cube before, I can drag this out all I want."

"Are there professors that know Norse myths? If Clint can telephone to confirm --"

"The best already consult with SHIELD."

"Think I slept with one once." Tony considered the ceiling. "Can't remember, I'll call Pepper." Captain Rogers sighed. "Of course."
"Hey, playboy here, did you miss that part?"

"Guys," Natasha cut in. "We still have to deal with Thor. We've wasted enough time already."

Captain nodded. "Tony, you can't wear the suit for this. You need back up. Clint?"

"That works," Clint said, raising a finger. "Hold on Stark, it really does. We can find somewhere to do it. Stark can control the a/v and Nat can bring Fury in on the whole thing, let whatever Thor says prove everything. If Stark goes in with Bruce, Cap can babysit Loki with the shield in case Thor gets pissed off and shows up. It's the only thing we've got that repels Mjolnir at all, so ..."

Tony grimaced. "Yeah, yeah, I get the plan, it sounds all pat and whatever and we're brave little toasters, but are we sure that Loki's some child soldier or something? I'm not, you know, Clint can talk up the prof or whatever, I'm gonna do that, but right now, are we sure that this isn't going to blow up and prove us all wrong? I've got a bit of cred with Fury now, I actually kind of like it. He leaves me alone. He sends Pepper. It's awesome, I don't want to -- oh God, I'm assimilating, this is terrible, remind me to steal his eyepatch, Jarvis, make a note, no assimilation."

"Topic, Tony," Captain Rogers said impatiently.

He coughed and straightened the hem of his shirt. "Fine, ignore my pain. Point is. We sure?"

"Either way," Natasha said, "we need to know why he isn't escaping and using the Tesseract to go somewhere else."

"It's got magic of its own. Selvig said it was a matter of using it. There was the mindcontrol spear but it's like a pen or something, you can still write without it. And Loki can do all the writing he wants so long as he's got a source. So why isn't he making a break for it?" Clint pointed at her. "So what she said."

"I just ..." Captain Rogers shuffled uncomfortably. "It stinks. We should know."

Tony stared at them all, then rolled his eyes. "Figured. Yeah, yeah, got it, Capsicle. I'll get Bruce, haul him in with me, Thor likes Bruce. Between us we'll dazzle Thor with brilliance and science and pry it out of him. And if Thor gets too wigged Hulk can smash him." He waggled his eyebrows, a grin slowly spreading over his face. "But! I got a crate of mead delivered. No Hulking when you've got mead, right?"

Laughing was a relief; laughing with the three of them moreso. They felt confident to her now, as though they believed themselves capable. Good. There was only so much team maintenance she was prepared to do in a given day. "Let's find a spot and do it."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

Tony beamed. "I can't wait to see Fury's face."

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Getting a place that fit the requirements wasn't easy for someone who wasn't Clint.
But Clint was Clint, and after an hour of inspection with Tony and Steve bickering on the comms they found somewhere. It looked like it was supposed to be an officer's lounge at some point, and in its favour:

-- 85% a/v coverage with clear reception above where Tony would steer Thor to sit (Natasha)
-- 5 hiding spots (Clint)
-- 2 doors, 1 already locked down (Natasha)
-- comfortable couches (Tony)
-- little-used (Steve)
-- a bar (Tony)
-- access to outside and airstrips (Bruce)

In its disfavour:

-- ugly as fuck
-- lack of coverage directly behind the bar
-- lack of general cover
-- too far away from weaponised SHIELD personnel to get fast backup
-- too close to Loki’s cell
-- really, really ugly as fuck

They went with it.

Five minutes later he had a phone number from Potts and office hours.

Talking to Stark's one-nighters wasn't something he'd ever expected to end up doing, and it sure as fuck wasn't in the job description.

"Hi?" Clint took a moment to audit the background noise on her end. Mid-size office. Cinderblock, a noisy analog clock, midday most likely. Door shut, some metal in range, probably filing cabinets, an angled damper to the reverb of her breathing that suggested either specialised corkboard or books. There was a rustle, like wrapping, and he heard her chew. Lunchtime, then. "Hello?"

"Hey, uh, Professor Petersen? Nordic folklore? I'm Agent Bertan with SHIELD and I was wondering if you had time for a quick runthrough of some details."

She gulped audibly.

Every agency, sooner or later, had an incident that was badly-assigned, badly-executed, or badly-cleaned that dogged the footsteps of every one of its employees and more often than not ruined the chain of command’s careers. Bruce Banner was SHIELD's incident.

Clint considered the profile Pepper helpfully included, and added: "Just a few, professor. It's nothing official; my boss is just ... side-project-ing, and I'm kinda lost, and uh, I mentioned it to Tony? Tony Stark? and your name came up."

"Oh, Tony? He remembered me? God, that was years ago. Wow. Mind like a steel trap, that one."

"Although ... lots of steel there."

Clint could hear her smirking, relaxing, and while it galled that the mention of Tony fucking Stark worked magic, he could use it. It didn't explain how helpful she got once he brought up specific lines from the Eddas; she was probably a terrific teacher to people that weren't from scary government agencies with incidents dogging their heels. She even managed to teach Clint to half-pronounce some of the names, and Angrboda was damned hard.
Once they wound down he thanked her for her time, assured her that she'd been very instructive, politely refused her mobile, and hung up.

Clint pulled the tablet closer on his thigh, scrolling through lines of painstakingly annotated old-timey poetry, and had... no idea what to fucking do.

Sure, the plan, but some of the myths he remembered as probably not actually being myths (Loki slept once, exactly once, Clint at his feet with a bow half-drawn, and when he woke half an hour later Clint swore he could feel, for half a second, a weight on his hips that shifted, with claws opening him from the stomach out) linked straight up into things that he didn't recognise at all. Didn't mean they weren't true, but Clint half-suspected a lot of the myths were pure bullshit as far as the Asgard they had to deal with was concerned. The lack of proper criteria bugged him.

It was messy and frankly weird, a lot like the inside of his head, and he hated Loki, still.

Hating him was pure and clear as the feeling of unexamined purpose he'd had when he was an evil minion, though, and Clint learned a long time never to trust anything that felt simple. Loki thrived on being ambiguous, on being whatever to whoever for whatever, and the fact was, he just couldn't decide on the whoever he'd been while megaminding him and Selvig.

Bugfuck, yeah, but aside from the killing and shooting and eyeballs, which wasn't all that different to the stuff SHIELD asked him to do years back when espionage was a thousand times easier and his handler less likely to rein him in, Loki had been weirdly decent. Sick, in more ways than one, and Clint vaguely recalled having to steady him out of fainting at one point, but not sadistic.

The hate was almost like a leftover gift, distilled and poured back into Clint's head, some twisted reward. It just sat there, being hate. Not hateful, not malicious or whatever thesaurus wanted to cook up, just hate. It felt like nothing to have it just sitting around being true. It didn't motivate him, didn't drive him, didn't twist his head into taking shots he shouldn't. Nothing passionate in it. No temper. Just hate being hate, like an element on the periodic table, and all of it was for Loki.

Selvig asked him about it afterwards, if he felt the way it made everything that wasn't about Loki turn into background.

Yeah, Clint felt it. Nothing was more important than his presence or the red patches on his jaw where the gag shifted and bit in. Not to do anything about, nothing to solve or destroy. Just facts hanging out larger than life or context and overshadowing everything else.

It was the loneliest thing Clint had ever experienced.

So yeah, he hated Loki. He pitied him too.
Steve finished three punching bags, showered, and went to guard the prisoner. It was hard not to think of it as babysitting now; being told he was young made it a lot easier to see. There was a look to it, hungry and gangly.

He greeted the guards, still finding it odd that strangers knew his name, and they let him, his comm and his sketchbook in but muttered to each other over the shield and the potential conductivity properties of the graphite in his pencils. Steve almost didn't mind pulling rank anymore.

Loki was asleep or seemed to be, lying on the mattress with his knees pulled in tight as a comma. Cold, maybe, and Steve got the guards to kick up the temperature before he sat down on the floor, shield tucked under his arm.

It was a cell, no two ways about it. A giant, open-glass cell with a spare mattress from one of the staff rooms since the infirmary couldn’t spare one. Thor had survived Mark One, but from what he said only barely and only with the help of his hammer. It was as good a recommendation as any, and it made Steve feel better about putting him back in. Made him feel better about getting in there with him.

As usually happened when he had nothing particular in mind, he drew the Howling Commandos: Peggy, Bucky, Howard, Dugan. Peggy especially.

He finished one of the look on her face after she’d punched the soldier, tightly-coiled and powerfully sure of herself, and looked up to find Loki had turned over and was now watching him, blanket twisted around his legs.

"Sleep all right?"

He shrugged at the narrow look he got. "I don't either. Bit too soft, that's true." Steve added a little detail to her hair and neatened the collar of her uniform. She’d always been scrupulous about her uniform. "I'm not here to talk you to death. I wouldn't know how. But I do want to say a few things. We've got stories about you. Did you know that?"

Loki looked weirdly sulky, and Steve twitched a smile.

"A lot of them are pretty bad. Gory, I mean. I was sick a lot when I was little, and there was a neighbour that studied classics before he had to leave his post. There was a war, and academics, I don't think they were liked much. Anyway, he took books with him. Took him months to let me read them, but I did. Borrowed one at a time and sat up in my sickbed devouring them."

He flipped to a new page and started drawing Loki as he remembered him the last time he was in SHIELD's custody, intent and menacing. Not like how he looked now with his bruised face and sullen eyes.

"Hang in there, I've got a point. Coming to it now, as a matter of fact. They said you were a trickster and pretty firm about it. I don't see that, maybe you've not had the chance, but I'll take their word for it. They also said you were a liarsmith. The liarsmith. That's a very specific epithet. A lot of people argue whether you deserve it from the myths, but not all that many would say you don't have it."

Steve rubs his chin, thinking. He's not a Stark easy with words, and he's not Agent Romanova either, to make them layer bright with the potential to hurt.
"You called me a soldier. A man out of time. A liar would've said anything for the sake of wounding us deeper right then; you knew the others were listening, I think. A wordsmith would have said something to cut across all of us, deep or not. 'Man out of time' is a pretty phrase but it's not something that sticks by itself unless you know it's true. It is. And you knew that. A liesmith would know sometimes the truth is a weapon."

It's not a power he wants, and he's not old enough to have it anyway -- everyone else is in their thirties and forties, and he's barely twenty-five. But some things, a lot of things, everything really, are more important than what Steve wants.

"What all this winds up to, I guess, is that I think you pick what you say, and you pick what you do, and a lot of the time they're the same thing. And you know a lot of truth, and you lie so you can keep it to yourself. I've known a lot of people like that. Liesmith. Truthkeeper. They don't sound too different where I'm sitting."

He glanced around, for his own benefit as much as to illustrate the point; Loki's unrelenting stare had become more and more contemptuous.

"Food for thought."

Steve shrugged and chose a different pencil, and when he looked up, Loki was standing over him, tall, skinny and dangerous. Like this, stripped of his armour and bound, fed by plastic through his nose and into his stomach, food pouch tacked at the small of his back where he couldn't reach it with the chains, vulnerable was still the last word Steve would use for him.

He met Loki's eyes and waved the guards to stand down with the pencil in his hand, noticing how his gaze followed it hungrily, flickered to the cameras. Considered the long arc of the chain. "You could very well try to kill me. Wouldn't work the way you'd want, but you could for the sake of it," he said mildly, then closed the sketchbook and held it out. "You could show me something instead. If you wanted. No hassle if you don't. It's nice to get drawing time in; I haven't had much since they pulled me out of the ice."

Loki looked ... odd, at that last. But he took what Steve offered and stepped away with the backing balanced on the tips of his fingers like every bibliophile Steve ever knew, flipping briskly through the pages and tilting his head a little differently at each one. "War buddies," Steve said, feeling the weight of Loki's attention. Being listened to like this intently felt like fingernails in his head, sharp little teeth sucking splinters from his wounds. "They're all dead now. Nobody in our unit lasted long."

He reached the last sketch and sneered. With the lower half of Loki's face obscured it was still incredibly expressive, almost funny, and Steve smiled.

"I can't get the armour right offhand," he admitted. "Sorry."

Loki snapped it shut and half-turned, flicking his wrist to slide it back over Steve's knees. It came to rest so that the bound end rested against his stomach; flippant, for sure, but right there was the unconscious care of someone who cared about books. Steve liked him a little better for that. It wasn't much, but compared to nothing, it was a lot.

Loki paced away, winding the chains in his hands. They were in one of the bigger holding cells, thirty by thirty feet, and Steve was glad of the room. It was easier to forget on camera that he wasn't human, but up close and looming like that his presence was stifling and it was a lot harder to put the destruction his army caused out of his head.
"Do you read English? I could get books in here. Some of the new ones aren't too bad."

He turned his head and gave a long, level look, something bitter and superior curling at the corners of his eyes.

"Yeah, all right, course you do. Stupid question."

It was almost like having a conversation out loud; Loki had the expert muscle control Steve associated with dancers and people who handled bombs for a living. Except that Steve had seen that particular, specific look once and only once before, on Howard Stark when Steve asked him how he knew what he did.

Howard had passed it off, smirking expansively over his own genius and a side mention of his father's shipbuilding engineers, but there it was: the scion of an unimaginably wealthy family expected to be nothing less and nothing, absolutely nothing, more than that. Steve had no particular pity or sympathy for Howard, brilliant, reckless, haunted Howard, but it didn't take any special insight to realise he'd been left with his own mind and no-one to credit with a steadying hand.

Loki's hand closed around his throat, chainlinks surprisingly heavy against his chest, and Steve looked up into green eyes so bewildered and angry that he might as well have been looking into the first mirror they'd let him see after being defrosted. There was no pull to the grip, only hard breaths through his nose chilling Steve's face and godly strength wavering on the edge of a reason, any reason, to explode. Steve wasn't going to be responsible for that, and he waved the guards down again, not taking his eyes off Loki's face.

"You must be cold in here," he said. "I'll make sure you get blankets. Please unhand me."

Loki considered him, some edged alertness settling him and taking every inch of Steve's measure, then stalked away and wrapped the chains back around his hands.

Steve was pretty sure he'd just passed a probationary hearing. Not that he knew what Loki's conditional approval meant. Slightly less painful death? He finished one sketch and started another as Loki sat crosslegged on the floor, hands open on his knees and eyes closed.

It looked like Dr Banner's meditation, though he never was quite this still, and the relief of having Loki's awareness focused inward and away startled him, shock inside his skin like lemonade in summer.

For sure, Loki grew on a person, the way strangling vines did. Steve saw the world under Loki's rule with sudden clarity. He would have been -- no, not an emperor, or a king -- a lord, probably a good one as long as he stayed, the people getting used to him, falling under the weight of his being what he was at full power; Steve doubted they'd actually seen it, the way they hadn't yet got to see whether Thor actually could fight for weeks without rest.

When he stopped the world would have broken and died with terror at his absence, and -- and. Steve paused, trying to figure it out.

Loki probably would have ignored all their service and gratitude, however long, however genuine, and taken only their death as proof of his success.

Steve didn't know what to do with that. Right or wrong it unsettled him, but it also felt familiar. It echoed in the pictures he'd seen with overweening romances where they proclaimed they were nothing without each other, and what were they if not together? and too in the field, with a soldier trying to get up even with their guts running out their ass so they could die in battle the way
everything told them heroes did, and what were they if not heroes?

It was very immature reasoning. A fantasy where the only thing that mattered was the triumphant ending. It was frankly childish, and a cold settled inside him that had nothing to do with battle or memories or knowing that soon, maybe right now, Agent Romanova was with Commander Fury and Agent Hill, and Tony and Dr Banner with Thor; it had everything to do with Bucky.

Brave, loyal, stupid Bucky.

'He damn well must have thought you were worth it', they'd said before Steve knocked on Schmidt's door, and Steve wasn't. He wasn't, and war wasn't a story where everyone got to be a hero, and loving someone didn't make them yours, and dying for the people you loved might be noble but it sure as hell wasn't kind.

Pretending it was, being able to pretend at all -- that was a little kid under the covers hoping against the boogyman, and Loki wore his covers on his skin, had wrapped himself in these ideas and declared freedom a lie. Freedom meant the story might end differently, that the loss of his rule might not break them, that sometimes people chose to leave for no reason at all and soldiers died of influenza before ever putting on a uniform and bullies beat up a kid behind a diner with no passing adult ever stepping in and everyone thought themselves to be in the right.

That certainty was gone, had been torn away with the armour and spear and clawing mania, and all that was left in the room with him was a figure from a contradictory sprawl of stories that might all be wrong or all right, preserved unchanging in scraps of rhyme for a thousand years.

Steve felt older than a god, and he didn't like it at all.
As she predicted, the preparations took about two hours. For Natasha most of that was compiling everyone's evidence and doing what none of the Avengers other than Clint had figured out yet: talking to Hill first.

Hill was Fury's right hand, his direct subordinate and major influence on every decision he made, and that had been the case long before Natasha worked at SHIELD.

But the guys -- Tony and Cap and infrequently Bruce -- always went straight to Fury, right to the top, assuming that was the best way of doing things. Man-to-man, big guy to big guy. It was so predictable.

Hill had a neatly-kept office she was never in, and Natasha tracked her to the aerospace engineering department and politely loitered while Hill finished browbeating the lead scientist with budget concerns.

"Nat." Restrained as usual, but she was happy to see her. It was mutual. She fell into step, Hill taking a short call on her comm as they walked. "What's the problem?"

"That you can assume there is one, for starters." Natasha waited for Hill's brief smile before continuing. "I've come across some delicate information, shortly to be confirmed, that'll change how we deal with our guest. And one of our team may be compromised."

Hill gave her a narrow look. Natasha knew what it meant and nodded.

Within three minutes they were in the most secure office on base -- Coulson's -- and Hill was breathing steam from a massive mug of coffee labelled Aperture Laboratories, waving Natasha to sit down opposite her. "Compromised?"

"If he confirms the information we have, yes. Careful handling at the very least."

"Which one? Please not Stark. He's unbearable."

Natasha shook her head. "Thor. Like I said, it's to do with Loki. This information was a team effort over the last day and a half, and as yet unconfirmed, but we believe from circumstantial and medical evidence that Loki may have been a child soldier exploited by the Asgard regime."

She chose her phrasing carefully, more suited to describing her own history than a planet of gods, and knew it wouldn't be ignored. There were connotations.

Hill sat back abruptly in Phil's chair, eyebrows high. "I'm listening. What do you have?"

"The Avengers believe Loki has the physical indications of being roughly fourteen years old, physically tortured at least once given stress patterns on several of his bones, and has experienced at
least one pregnancy. Given that he is a shapeshifter, this evidence may be contrived. I'd not be surprised if it was a ploy. However, his scans also indicate he is hermaphroditic or close to, and Thor has said himself that he does not consider Loki to be entirely adult or entirely male by the standards of his culture. There might be some truth to that." She waited for Maria's nod and went on. "Thor said the severity of his punishment will be decided as if he is both. There is some ambiguity of interpretation."

"Meaning?"

Natasha paused, testing the thread of her thoughts. "This is my opinion."

Hill leaned her elbows on the table, mug still cradled in her hands. "I value it. Go on."

"I believe Thor's implications were that Asgard would treat Loki's living return as a slur on the adult men of his culture. For some reason they've refrained from killing him, or he's just been too hard to kill, but public attempts at genocide are hard to hide. It would be easy to justify severe penalties with an appeal to vengeance."

Natasha knew Hill could picture the likely results as well as she could.

A hermaphroditic boy with enough of a functioning female reproductive system to be pregnant, with no existing doubt of his wrongdoing and unable to escape, punished by men who were deeply offended by his ambiguity and reinforcing one another, continuously under pressure to squash even the littlest doubt? Throwing him into a pit of poisonous snakes would be kinder. Murdering him themselves would be mercy.

"You mentioned confirmation?"

"Agent Barton has been examining the remaining folklore and comparing it to his memories of being under Loki's close control and finding that several myths, including one where he is tortured by having his lips sewn shut and Thor assisting his torturer, are likely to be true. He's compiling a report. Dr Banner and Tony Stark plan to interrogate Thor under surveillance in approximately ten to twenty minutes with Agent Barton as backup. They have internal comms if anything goes wrong."

Hill, ever steady and unflappable, only looked faintly ill. "I assume this is responsible for Captain Rogers camping out in Loki's cell with his shield."

"Yes, ma'am."

Natasha waited as Hill slowly drank and stared a little past her head, obviously calculating a response.

"Why is the pregnancy of particular interest?"

"They say it was a horse's foal. There's also a myth that he got pregnant by eating the heart of a giantess, but we can't cross-confirm that."

"Ah," a sound that spoke volumes, and they shared a look: how is this our lives?

Three minutes later Hill drained her coffee and moved aside, gesturing to the screens. "I won't wake Fury until Thor confirms at least three pieces of conjecture, but if he does I'll suggest altering Loki's status to extradited war criminal pending the paperwork. If you can get Stark to sponsor him it'll go more smoothly." She sighed. "And I will need so, so much more coffee. Which room should I pull?"

"L3-D1-F78." Natasha got up to refill Hill's mug. It was a massive risk Maria was taking, letting
them do this, and if Natasha could ply her with coffee, she would.

Three crisp streams filled the screen, alternate angles of Tony and Banner on an arrangement of couches and a low table, bottles open between them.

After a moment the audio cut in, extraordinarily clear. Clint did good work. "-- and I said, 'telophase? You're no polyphase! It's uh, it's ... funnier if you were ... there."

Tony patted the air in Banner's direction. "It was a good try. I've said worse. There was a conference in, I actually don't remember, but I was so shitfaced I tried to make out with the microphone."

"Unbearable," Hill murmured, and took her mug. "Thanks."

Natasha dragged the chair around the table to wedge herself in next to Hill, touching her comm. "Clint, we're good to go. Stark, you're up. Banner, smile. You're on camera."

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The horse story was, unfortunately, epic all round.

It was the three of them, Tony, Bruce and Thor, everyone else ruled out on the grounds that if any of it was true, like true-true, not Clint-feeling-true but triple-confirmed by Thor and x-rays and the rest of the medical stuff they were slowly getting set up in case they had time leftover, Natasha would add two and two and come up with four and probably die trying to kill Thor on the spot with Clint not far behind and Steve failing to keep them apart and looking utterly betrayed and it would all end in nasty nasty interplanetary diplomatic incidents or declarations of war, depending on how unfriendly everyone was feeling.

It came down to history of the personal kind.

Steve was too undamaged that way, Natasha and Clint too damaged, and Bruce and Tony were somewhere between, Goldilocks' middle bear with the just-right bed of almost-coping and the just-right porridge of almost-too-much familial hate.

To make matters worse Thor was a natural storyteller, and Tony started drinking ten minutes early just to detach himself from the big blonde inviting charisma of him and actually listen to the words.

He regretted that decision a lot. Every thirty seconds, actually. Probably every five minutes for the rest of his life.

"So the horse thing is true," Tony said blankly, cutting through the wind-down of thous and thees and epithets, god, the epithets, wasn't that supposed to be a Greek thing? Why did these guys have it too? It was unfair.

Getting Thor started had really been too easy.

Bring in some Starktech, make it green-scaled instead of blue so it looked more like Loki's magic, set out mead and coffee, dump a woven rug on the couch for Bruce to shiver in because he was a wuss who couldn't handle temperatures below frying-eggs-on-pavement, and feed him poptarts (there was even a toaster, Natasha was scary-thorough), answer his questions about refining the fabric of his cape and show him the models Tony did in ten minutes at three in the morning, and he spilled his guts like bleeding heart candies.
If they were horrifying, torture-riffic, rape-tastic candies, anyway.

"That's ... actually kind of refreshing." Except for the part where his brain was trying to crawl off without him.

"That is as nothing!" Thor cried, way too happy, like he was actually telling stories of the Good Old Days and he just wanted to spread it around everywhere. Good, good old days. Tony focused on the crumbs around Thor's mouth and swallowed puke. "You mortals impress too easily. For that is the tale of the valiant steed of Loki's womb whom none but All-Father may ride, aye, but there was then the frost giant Angrboda, and my brother bore her three children!"

Tony knew Bruce was staring just as much as he was, and he also knew that Bruce, having issues that made 'getting screwed over for the rest of your life because your dad made a bet' strike way too close to his personal history, had officially completely and totally lost the ability to wingman Tony's manipulation. "Wow."

Thor laughed. "It is a fine tale, friends."

"Okay, just, one thing, if you say 'Loki's womb' ever again," Tony said, very faintly and clearly and getting over his attack of speechlessness as fast as possible, "I will puke. I don't want to think about it!"

Thor chuckled. "I understand. Let us not. Though my brother is mine still, he is foolish. There are many tales. Many more. It is ... a relief, to tell them."

"Yeah, actually, uh, I get that. I mean, you grew up with him, and I bet you got him out of a lot of scrapes, huh?"

Bruce looked ... green. Not even Hulk-green. Just green, and his eyes were glassy.

Definitely not wingman material. Maybe not even 'remembering what day it is was' material.

"Go away," Tony told him, shooing. "We're almost out of mead, bring some, okay? There's like ... crates of the shit in cargo, just flirt with that officer. She liiiiiikes you."

Bruce eyed him, shook his head and smiled awkwardly at Thor, then got up and left in a kind of crab-shuffle, as though he didn't want to turn his back on Thor but couldn't figure out how to open the door at the same time.

"I wish you well in your conquest!"

"Loki's womb!" Tony shouted after him, just on douchebag principle, and realised he might have gone a tad too far when the door slammed. Oh, well. At least SHIELD gave up on plastering their ceilings years ago.

He swallowed, gorge rising again now that he was alone with Thor. Thor, who still looked like Thor, in the bright red cape and good-natured obsession with every single flavour of poptart that ever existed, the Thor that told them how Coulson died and seemed genuinely sorry. And maybe he was, that was the thing. Maybe he was sorry, because Agent Coulson was a warrior or something, so it was okay.

"And now I said it and I think I will puke, yeah, yeah, I think, wait, Thor -- Thor. Buddy." Tony sat forward and clapped a hand on Thor's shoulder, looking him in the eye. "Three?"

"Aye. It is a grisly tale. She was a most wicked creature. The children were monstrous beyond your
Thor looked disgusted, then brightened. "But the All-Father solved all things with his wisdom in the end. Have your spirits, and fortify yourself. I am told I tell it quite well!"

He really, really was going to puke.

"You know what. I'll go check on Bruce, see if he needs some liquid courage for the girl, she's totally into him, he's just shy. Have some of this, it's great. This bottle too. Have both, it doesn't matter, I'm coming back with more anyway. Very good, very expensive. Have it. Have it all. Don't -- don't smash it. I'll be back in a minute. Right back."

When he closed the door and fled as slowly as he could to the closest cargo bay, Bruce was pacing beside the alcove where the mead was tucked, his head in his hands, wound tighter than Jarvis when Tony overdid the repulsors. He didn't try to touch him, and the bay was mercifully empty -- most of the rooms on this end of the floor hadn't been used recently. "Hey."

He shook his head, gave Tony a horrible smile that promised Hulk if he disagreed. "I don't even care how old he is anymore. You know that. Right?"

"Yeah. Horse, it's not just for flagging octogenarians anymore."

Bruce made an awful noise that was probably supposed to be a laugh. "God."

"Pretty sure we just got told by one that riding your nephew totally isn't incest." Tony propped himself against the wall, head hanging, and let himself laugh, slowly sinking to the floor as the surreality of the situation overwhelmed him. "God. Oh, God."

"Nephew," Bruce gasped, and they were kneeling, wedged into the alcove and cough-laugh-hacking their lungs out on dust and disbelief.

"This is the fourth-worst worst day of my life," Tony said once he'd calmed down enough to talk. "You -- you need to go away so it's not the first worst. Like ... like ... do you like the Catalans? Go to the Catalans. All expenses paid. Frolic on a beach, catch whales with Hulk or something. I'll pay you, I swear."

"You're getting me out of the way before Thor bellows out the next one."

Tony made a face. "Didn't you hear? Three more of them."

Bruce choked.

"To a frost giant," he said with particular relish. "He's the 'mother of monsters' and a wicked frost giant had their wicked -- I don't, I can't finish that, I need my brain."

"Bwahughah," Bruce said. Tony wasn't sure if there were words in there. Either way he definitely agreed.

"At least I didn't say womb," he pointed out, with what he felt was great generosity given the situation. "Right then, anyway. You definitely need to go."

"Yes. Yes, quite." He staggered to his feet, clinging to the wall and brushing dust off his shirt with the absent air of someone lost in unsolvable theory. "Can your plane take the other guy?"

"It can carry Iron Man, so I don't see why not. Get rid of the stripper pole and you'll have room. And! They have Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventures! I snagged a master copy."
"Tony," very seriously, "if I loved you, and you were a woman --"

"-- you'd be cool as cucumber letting me run off with a stallion to be impregnated so you can win a fucking bet over a fucking wall!"

Bruce made an inarticulate noise of outrage combined with what Tony was pretty sure was a threatening case of sobbing-via-overidentification.

Tony slumped. Too many emotions, time to be an asshole. "Go away. Shoo. Fuck off. But strut when you do it. I'm proud of you, Padawan! You just got the biggest poke in the fucking world and you're not a giant green rage monster, I mean, cosmos! I just can't top that."

"Tony, you don't have to do --"

He looked up at him, perfectly aware that he looked ridiculous ruining his suit with mead-crate splinters and not caring because -- he couldn't believe he was saying this -- there were more important things right now. "Who else?"

Bruce looked -- a bit calmer, actually. Good old Bruce. "Captain's wrong. You don't go over the wire. You go through it."

"Haha, right, that's me, totally," Tony said, and pressed his palms to his face. discreetly patting the back of his head in case his brain exploded without telling him. "Okay. Hysterics done. I think."

He forced himself to shut up long enough for Bruce to help him up, make vague mumbling noises, then get turned around and ask for directions to the airstrip.

Tony waited for him to go away before he started dragging at one of the crates, propping it on his knees and letting himself curse out the world in general on the way back to Thor.

Everybody in SHIELD owed him their fucking lives for this. And their pensions. And their grandchildren and their pensions.

Everybody.

There was more than enough already for Loki to get permanent asylum if the situation was anywhere near normal and Loki wasn't so pathetically dangerous. But they might not ever get another chance like this.

So Tony got up, opened the door, went in, and closed it behind him.

The only reason he even did it was the fact that Loki was still in the facility and was the one it actually happened to, and if Tony didn't do this, he'd never be able to look himself in the face again. Not that he did much, but it was the principle of the thing. Principles were nice. Very wobbly but unexpectedly sturdy in the face of alien gods.

"Okay," and he was ridiculously and deservedly proud of himself when his hands didn't shake pouring the rest of the bottle that was left, the other already enthusiastically shattered on the floor. "We've got more, just grab one -- yeah, there you go. Tell me."

He finally got around to puking in the bar sink half an hour later.

"Thor," he said through through the remaining urge to gag up everything he'd eaten in the last month, "you're -- you're -- it was a good story. But fuck, MEAD. You could've warned me. MY ACHING HEAD etcetera etcetera."
Thor clapped him on the shoulder, leaning close and laughing, and still so genial and friendly that it felt like Tony's head was splitting from the cognitive dissonance. "Feel better in the morn! Do you need assistance to your quarters?"

"No, no, just ... let me die here or something. I don't need that lung anyway."

Tony puked again, careful to make it melodramatic enough to make Thor laugh, and wiped his mouth fastidiously with a bar napkin (seriously, Natasha thought of everything).

"Sooo, how old was he with the whole ... horse thing? Do you have sex ed on Asgard? Is it like 'don't eat these apples at the new moon' stuff? Or just basic 'don't stick it where you wouldn't lick it'?"

Thor shook his head. "Ah, Tony. We were young. Eight of your human years, perhaps, and I seventeen. Old enough to do battle, but it was never to his liking. He had honour once, so he played his tricks at my side nevertheless. It was a good time."

"Grow a conscience if honour matters that much," Tony muttered, and flailed vaguely for his phone. Pepper. He needed Pepper.

"What did you say?"

Oh, shit.

"Uh --" Tony grimaced at the press of Thor's hand to his shoulder, how close he was. Tall, and brooding, and strong. It was light, for a god's grip, and so was the smile, for a god's offense, eyes serious and -- god -- genuinely confused.

"I would hear it again, friend. I have done my best by my brother. Do you say it is not enough?"

Friend. Ha. That was a threat. Oh, was that a threat. That was the point, and Tony knew this song and dance.

"Thor! Buddy!" He clapped his shoulder in return. "My mouth talks without me, okay? It flaps, it's like a flag in the wind, do you have flags, uh, like a banner. But not like Bruce, just a plain ... cloth ... thing. Look, see, flapping, totally." He cleared his throat. "Okay, seriously. Everybody knows you love your little bro. Don't worry. Everybody. You tried, Thor. That's all anyone can ask." Tony plastered on a reassuring smile and squeezed his arm. "All good."

"Are you lying to me, Tony Stark?"

God, he sounded disappointed. And wounded. Wounded.

"No," he lied.

Thor considered him suspiciously. "If I have given offense --"

"No, no, no offense here, none taken. I've just had waaaaay too much mead. Waaaay too much." He yawned theatrically. "There, look."

There was a lot of bridled strength in that hand that suddenly didn't seem quite so bridled. He was never going to stop thinking about horses now, this was the world's most inappropriate time to laugh, urge rising rising rising like water rising rising rising like paralytics rising rising jesus christ --

"So that's where you fucked off to. And you're drunk. At three. What gives, Stark?"
Barton. Pale, and wide-eyed, and sweating like he just came from a spar with Natasha. And the quiver slung across his back, stuffed with god-tranq prototype arrows Tony'd been working on to keep Loki under if they had to. He had no idea how they'd work on Thor; they were tuned to Loki's spear-thing, not Mjolnir, but they were probably similar enough to at least give Thor some pause. He didn't want to think about the possible aftermath if they worked even a little, but he did anyway and retched again at the thought of Thor cracking his arms off his shoulders if he squeezed even a little wrong. His hand still hadn't moved.

"Tony has partaken of too much mead." Thor sounded like it was hilarious. "I did not think to warn him."

He almost pissed himself with gratitude for the diversion, and that quiver-clench reminded his digestive system that it wasn't empty yet.

"Thor," Tony said once he'd finished upchucking bile, quite calmly really, "let go. I really really don't want to puke on you, okay? You do not wanna let SHIELD's drycleaning get hold of your cape, they're completely incompetent, it'll be terrible, let's just all avoid this terrible sequence of events."

Thor frowned, but slowly let go and stepped back, all with the deliberation that said he could just as easily do anything he pleased whenever he pleased, and Clint got his attention with some question or other, probably his opinion on one of the rarer poptart flavours.

Tony turned, puked as noisily as he could again, and kept the trembling to his knees, trying to ignoring the flashbacks sagging his mouth and loosening his grip as he hurled. Oh, the righteous attitude pissed him off, but right now he had to back up Barton.

Barton, who was human, didn't even have a suit, or a superpower or a serum, just a human, preternatural-not-supernatural ability, and was prepared to face down a god that just almost crushed Tony in half with arrows that he didn't even know for sure would work.

That deserved a Darwin. Perfect candidate.

Tony loved him fiercely.

"I'm not getting any work done like this," he announced. "If I do it's gonna be like ... a bed delivery system, wait, hey, I could --"

"Shut up and lie down, you drunk fuck. I'll keep him company. Might try the cookie and cream poptarts. This box, were they good?"

Thor gave it the consideration it deserved. "Yes."

"Great. No more hurling, Stark! I'm not cleaning it up."

Tony protested and fussed and scowled as much as he could while letting Thor and Clint bundle him under the rug on the couch and pick up the bottles and shove too many cushions under his head.

He faked sleep convincingly, always had, but he doubted he'd ever sleep again.

***
Hill gave Natasha a long look, then handed her six sheets of paper. "Fill those out with as much information as you have. Reference points in the audio. I have a meeting, but radio me when you're done and I'll wake up Fury."

"Thank you," Natasha said.

She gave her a bloodless smile, rose, and held the mug close to her chest. Her hand was shaking. "Don't ever thank me for decency."
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Discussion of forced child bestiality. Also, I want to say for the purists that I am drawing at will from myths, stories, movies, comics, etc. and seeing what sticks, so if that offends you, be aware that this fic will only become more offensive in that regard as more chapters are posted.

Natasha changed over the audiovisual, asked the electromagnetic engineers about their readings from Mjolnir, egged a scientist into enthusiastically inviting Thor to come and show them his hammer, and trooped down to the conference room, touching her comm to let Captain Rogers know they were finished.

That was all she said, but the sound he made, soft and inarticulate, was something that would've haunted her if she hadn't heard it a hundred times already. He even thanked her.

"We'll need you in an hour or so. How's the prisoner?"

"Uh, I think he's meditating. Um, he was, oh, he just looked at me. Loki?"

She sighed. "Can he hear me?"

"I think so. Hey, Agent Romanova says hello."

Natasha was startled into a smile. "I did not." It was so very -- Rogers. "But I will. Hello." There. "I'm meeting the others. I'll let you know when it's time."

That and Thor dealt with, she ordered Clint to keep Stark alive and went to find Bruce.

Bruce was crouched with a fistful of spanners under a suspended fragment of quinjet, handing them to the engineer attempting to rescue as many parts as she could before it was destroyed. The more electronics they could reuse, the less the industrial architects complained.

"Hey, uh. Romanova." He squinted up at her; he looked wary, much warier than he had in Calcutta. "Guess you heard that I ran out on the, uh, interrogation. Sorry."

"It's all right." Natasha beckoned him away.

Bruce wiped his hands on his knees and followed her, apologising to the engineer. "Got worse, huh? You've got, uh, a hair. Out of place." He pointed.

She tucked it back. "I'm afraid so, Dr Banner."

He looked around the airfield, kilometres of emptiness in every direction, SHIELD's base an ugly blot to their right, his hands in his pockets. "Guess this is as good a place as any for the other guy to come out, huh? So ..."

"Thor says he was eight. The equivalent of eight. Not sure how well it really translates, but ... that's the general idea."
Bruce took one of those long, deep breaths she'd seen on Fury, every muscle tensed against impending aneurysm, and shook his head. "I ... you know, I, I kinda figured it was, uh, bad. That's kind of not -- I'm not surprised. I kinda wish I... don't worry about it. So, uh, what're you all gonna do?"

"Fury will issue extradition papers in about an hour and a half."

Bruce gave a half-laugh. It sounded hopeless. "It won't stick."

She met his eyes. "It buys us time."

"I guess. Time for what?"

"More evidence, digging up what we can. If you need to be left out of this, say so."

He shuddered. "Nah. No. No, I -- no. I'll be weird anyway. My brain's kinda, you know, scrambled right now."

"Understandable. Clint's watching Tony. Come back with me and we'll start."

"Hour and a half, huh?" But he fell into step with her, all the way back, even if he tensed as they went inside, and that was progress enough for her.

Tony looked miserable on the couch, prone and jaundiced. There was a glass in his hand, balanced on his chest; mead, coffee or both, and he was holding it more than drinking it. It shivered in time to the pulse of his reactor. It was hard to think of him as Stark anymore when he'd just done the emotional equivalent of walking on coals for the sake of someone that'd attempted to kill him. Proof Tony Stark Has A Heart, indeed.

But he gave her a cocky grin and waved his phone, and she knew that he'd stopped all the surveillance of the room he could find. Good, he was holding it together. Mostly. "Hey, guys. So uh ... anybody feel like they got a bridge dropped on them?"

Bruce sat, hunching over his knees. "Yeah."

Clint looked frustrated, bow half-drawn in his hand. "I've got even more fucking questions now."

"How do we know his estimates are correct? Has he ever seen a human child?"

"How do we do this so Fury doesn't eat us alive?"

"How do I make my head stop hurting?" Tony whined.

"Shut up," Clint told him.

"We have an hour before Fury gets involved. Let's have some ideas, gents."

There was a long, long silence.

"I'm fixing up magic-resistant materials with Jarvis," Tony said, lifting the glass.

"I'll look into Thor's scans," Bruce said. "He was happy enough to volunteer for them. I think he thinks we're, uh, cute."

Clint shrugged. " Loki's a shapeshifter, we saw that with the freaky horns. If Thor's scans bear it out ... wait, if he was 17 then, and Loki's 14 now --"
Natasha folded her arms. "Then he should look about 23. Early twenties is as close as you can probably get."

"It'll do. I mean, it's not precise, but Thor says he was eight. Does it really have to be?"

She traded glances with Tony; he made faces back at her.

"Thor thinks he was the equivalent of eight," she corrected. "We can't confirm that directly."

"Hell of a lot going unconfirmed around here," Tony muttered. "I don't like it. I mean, yeah, okay, so ... horse. Maybe it's normal. Maybe they all go fuck horses and we're the weird ones."

Clint stared down at him. "Do you actually believe that?"

"No," Tony grumbled. "I'd feel better if I did."

Bruce looked sick again. "Never thought I'd be grateful the other guy was my own fault."

Tony barked a laugh at that. "Jesus, Bruce."

"We're getting off topic. Fury's going to call us in. What do we say?"

"The truth?"

"And what is that?" She stared them down. "Fury isn't going to be convinced because we have feelings."

Tony thumped his head on the arm of the couch. "He's a mass murderer with issues. Don't they all have issues? Aren't issues the thing? He's still a douchebag."

"Right now we need to focus on the questions, people. Like whether we send him back to Asgard right now or not. Do we say that because he did so much shit here, he should serve time here by our terms and then go off to Asgard? Do we just let him go with the Thor and the Tesseract and forget this?"

"You --"

"It's just a question, Banner." Clint thumbed the string of his bow. "Just a question."

"Thor hasn't asked yet," Natasha said. "For either of them. Either he's assuming we'll hand them over or he's waiting for something."

"Other than the Tesseract? Maybe he needs dear old daddy holding his hand to get back."

"How does that even work anyway?" Tony sat up, clutching his shoulder and grimacing. "Loki said something about his dad kicking Thor down here with dark energy. What the fuck is dark energy? Is Odin going to use the Tesseract as a focus and just grab whatever's holding it, or is it like a thing somebody has to make? Am I gonna have to make it?"

Bruce stood up, hands spreading flat. "This isn't relevant, okay? He's a kid."

"We think he is," Tony said, holding up a finger. "We think, and we only know because Thor said so, and excuse me if I don't believe half the shit comes out of his mouth. And I ask again, my shakespeareans in the ... office ..., doth mother know you weareth her drapes?"

Natasha raised an eyebrow. "You think Thor doesn't know Loki's both all the time."
Tony raised an eyebrow back. "Shapeshifter, hello? Is he anything all the time?"

"Other than a total asshole?"

Tony giggled and pointed at Clint. "That is very, very true. But seriously, I want one good reason why his trauma is our problem. If it's happened, it's happened. Centuries back, probably. The foal is probably a mighty steed by now or something and chewing all the scenery in Asgard. Angsting about it now isn't going to do much good."

"He's here," Bruce said.

"Temporarily! On a temporary basis. I said a good reason."

"We aren't total assholes?" Clint said.

Tony made an indignant noise. "Speak for yourself!"

"I'm not," Natasha said over all of them.

He raised the glass, pointing, then visibly deflated. "Yeah, okay. Fine. But I still don't like you."

"So we're all agreed? Buy some time to figure more of this out?"

Clint shrugged. "Guys, what's the focus here? We don't know how old he is. We don't know if it's normal. We don't know a whole lot about anything."

"We know that Thor is the prince and heir to Asgard and he," raising his glass, voice perfectly deadpan, "thinks his brother getting raped by a horse is funny."

They all took a long, long moment at that.

"Is it too late to say that I don't even wanna know yet?" Tony looked wistful, then sat up again. "Oh, shit, he was telling me about the other kids --"

Bruce talked over him, and so did everyone else. "NO, TONY."

"Jesus, Stark, one fucking kid at a time."

He subsided, grumbling, but kept an eye cracked open. "I feel like horse rape is like the gold standard of something or other. It needs an award. Can we make an award?"

"Think before you douche,' " Clint said, fiddling with an arrow.

Tony giggled. "I love you, dude."

Clint bristled like a cat brushed the wrong way. "What? God, Stark, you're completely trashed."

"I think I have very good reasons for being trashed, thanks. Four of them actually. I need to be more trashed. Hand me the mead."

"Tony --"

"HAND. ME. THE. MEAD."

Bruce silently poured him a drink. Natasha watched him inspect Tony's face and come to the same concerned conclusion. All this had taken more out of Tony than they'd thought it would, than Tony
himself had thought.

"Thank you," he said snippily, and downed half of it, then sat back, head lolling. "What a
clusterfuck."

"Are you having flashbacks?" Clint said, eyeing him sharply, and Natasha saw how Tony was
rubbing hard circles around the reactor in his chest, fingers twitching as though to claw inside.

"So what?"

Bruce took the glass out of Tony's hands.

"Hey!"

"Tony, I hate to say it, but we need your brain here. Okay?"

"Fine. Give it back." Bruce made faces but relented. Natasha sat down beside him, finding all three
of them so twitchy that she automatically inspected everyone for weapons when Tony pointed at her.
"You need something. You have a needy face."

"The process would be easier if you would sponsor it."

"Make Steve do it. He's the moral one. And they have a bond. They're probably dyeing each other's
hair. 'Oh, Steve, you look like Ginger Rogers! A great artist of the screen!'" Tony said breathily.
"'Oh Mae, darling, you're a --' Ow, shit!"

Clint rapped his head with the point of his bow. "Don't do that again. Ever."

"Tony," and Bruce sounded so wretched that Natasha could see Tony pulling himself together,
clicking into place piece by piece, as he took a long, long swallow to poorly-conceal his shudder.

"Right. Okay. Sorry, bro. Just gimme whatever I have to sign. We need time. Legit time. Only so
much stalling I'll get to do before Fury's head explodes."

He sounded entirely too smug. Such were the circumstances that Tony Stark being a dickhead came
as a relief. Natasha's life was very, very strange.

"So, okay, who do we actually need to worry about? I'm talking reprisal now, keep up. Their dad?
That gatewatcher guy? The council? Everybody in Manhattan?"

"The gatekeeper if anybody. I think Odin gets most of his info from him. Like if he was Jarvis. But
scarier. And everywhere."

Tony gave a slow clap. "So that's why he doesn't freak him out! So, wait, hold on, if he's Jarvis and
he watches everything, doesn't that mean he's watched me have sex?"

Bruce managed to huff at that, not quite a laugh but easing up a bit. "Yeah, probably."

"No he hasn't. I don't give free shows. Moving on." Tony almost managed to look prim. "The
council could try to nuke us, but that didn't work out last time. Besides, we'll sic Steve's patriotic
puppy eyes on them and sign them up for his This Isn't The Country I Fought For lectures. Give him
twenty minutes and they'll be adopting rescue kittens and calling them Uncle Sam."

"Which just leaves everybody else," Bruce said, and studied his hands. "But, uh, I broke Harlem,
and you've all, uh... chequered pasts, and we could walk out this room if we wanted. Kinda
hypocritical."
"It's the nature of SHIELD," Natasha said. "The Avengers were a good idea at the time."

Clint slung his bow over his shoulder. "Yeah, anybody need Loki?"

There was another long silence.

"That," Tony said, picking up the half-empty bottle and pouring himself another with typical flourish, "is fucking depressing. You know what would fix that? A horse. A really nice Arabian and everything. Get in a bit of bow-chicka-neigh-neigh."

"TONY."

Clint whapped him while Bruce made awful half-laughing half-sick noises, moaning into his palms.

She wouldn't pretend it wasn't blackly, horribly funny in a Starkesque way, but she would never ever show it. She had standards and Tony had no hope of being clever enough to concuss himself on them. "Tony," more level, "Stop breaking Doctor Banner."

"I wasn't touching him."

Natasha glared.

"Fine. Fine. I'm sorry, I'm an asshole. I'm sorry I'm an asshole. Bruce? You checked out on us?" He snapped his fingers. "Hey."

"Leave him alone. That wasn't funny, Stark," Clint said, and Natasha picked up the thread, long-used to talking over breakdowns. Sometimes it was the only comfort there was.

"So we're agreed we'll push for extradition and more time? This will only work if we're unanimous."

"Either it's true and we'll feel better for doing it or it's not true and it won't hurt anything," Clint said. "Let's go with it."

Tony looked up at him, stretching his arm across the back of the couch. "You okay there, Hawky?"

Clint scowled. "Back off."

"Touchy."

Natasha got to her feet. "Meet me in Agent Coulson's office. You've got thirty minutes to sober up." Footsteps, and Clint met her eyes and backed away. "Thirty seconds. Sit up. Sit up!"

"Whu?"

Bruce snatched the glass out of Tony's hand and set it down just in time.

"You lot." Fury filled the doorway and fixed a glare on them. "Splain to me why I've got goddamn extradition papers for Loki on my desk. Do it fast."

"That depends," Tony said, stroking his chin, and Natasha watched Fury's expression change in slow motion. "Do you care if a mass murderer's a minor? You know, hypothetically. But not so hypothetical."
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Child abuse, trauma, the usual warnings. I love Fury.

Bruce was having flashbacks as much as Tony, but either he hid them better or they didn't know him well enough yet. He doubted anyone did.

They were all tripping over themselves to explain, and Clint produced the scans from somewhere, and Tony waved at Thor's that Bruce hadn't a chance to look at yet, transparently green above his phone which apparently did everything but wipe Tony's ass.

Natasha was getting into it too, low and sure, maybe the way she'd persuaded someone to even get the papers on Fury's desk to begin with, and Clint was muttering about poetry, and mind control, and horses.

Tony -- well, Tony was in full form, swinging from condemning Loki and suggesting they drop him in a hole to declaring diplomatic war on Asgard and ending up somewhere on the pendulum that sounded like 'I hate him but this just isn't fair'.

Bruce agreed with him on that one, but he also disagreed. The problem with Tony -- with everything -- was that he hadn't ever had the chance to think he could please his father.

Little Bruce, in a borrowed jacket and taped shoes, had, once, because there'd been the few and far between times when his father had been drunk enough to let anyone touch him and in good enough of a mood to touch Bruce, and those times, with a story, or being allowed to watch football on the floor at his father's feet, had been the best. If he was very good, his father made sandwiches, and put them on plates and gave Bruce one, and didn't take it away.

The hope of those times had led Bruce to do a lot of things. He'd walked sixteen blocks at four in the morning to a 24/7 bottleshop and begged anyone that passed to buy his sick father some booze, some beer, anything, and if he got enough change, enough ruffling pats and shoves that ended with him skidding on hoarfrosted leaves, there was a night clerk that knew him, and his father, and let him take a bottle off the shelves with a wink and a wet kiss to his neck.

A lot of things.

Bruce couldn't quite wave away the shock of recognition that'd come with Thor's retelling, the memory of being ten, and hoping, and never quite learning to expect being left to dangle from the shower rod while his father pissed and drunkenly splashed his toes.

He was good at scales. It came with the job he'd had, the one Fury pretended to ask him to do and he'd let a computer do instead; radiation was all about relative scales.

The story was extraordinary, horses and foals and all, but the impulse was so terribly mundane, and it was that mundaneness cleaving so close. Bruce could see it, all of it, even as he felt echoes of the stinging, septic pain under his arms where his childhood shirts had once cut in. Because of it, probably.
Bruce had so wanted not to be hurt, and had wanted so, so much more to please his father just enough, just right, for the support of his father's shin against his back.

He raised his hand in the middle of Tony's rambling explanation that he really could build a magic-resistant cell by the end of the week. He'd never liked Fury; Fury was too much like other people who were, in the end, better to leave than keep.

But none of this was about whether Bruce liked anybody, and he hadn't expected them to notice when he got hold of himself. (It would have been nice, but this wasn't about nice, either.)

"Thor said they're considered to be warriors when they're eight. I don't know if that's true, but if it is, I'm asking you -- you, personally -- would you give that as somebody's first order?"

Fury sighed and in general gave off the attitude of being terribly, terribly put-upon. He also looked like this wasn't something he was prepared to forget in a hurry, and Bruce could find some respect for that.

"You all are saying you want me to tell Thor, their crown prince, their supreme warrior who controls lightning, to go where the sun don't shine 'cause you think his little brother might be traumatised? Are you nuts?"

Tony peered over the top of sunglasses he'd somehow produced while Bruce was trying not to have an anxiety attack. "I'm here. Here." He pointed. "That's on you. Keeping aliens here a while shouldn't be a problem."

Fury looked like he was going to have an aneurysm. It was a little funny. A lot. But an actual aneurysm would be ... much less funny, and Bruce cleared his throat.

"We don't need the Tesseract. I mean, it's -- it's why the Chitauri guys came in the first place, right? We can't -- we can't deal with that. But Thor can travel with it, right? So he can take the tesseract once Tony's got the magic cage up and come back for ... visitation, I guess? A few days or something?"

"Cute." Fury was deeply unimpressed, that much was obvious, and he folded his arms. "Not going to work. You want this to happen, you better give me something that's not civvies getting cold feet."

"You could just tell him we have cultural differences. Like -- like, a custom, right?"

"We can't know they won't torture him and we know we won't," Clint said. "Isn't that the point?"

"Facts, Agent Barton."

Tony made an exaggerated idea face. "We could just Steve to ask him if he has kids. He has no reason to lie to us and hey, Steve's still alive, he totally likes Steve. We can do that right now! Agent Romanova, fairest spider of them all --"

She rolled her eyes and touched her comm.

"I'm stealing your audio, sorry." Bruce watched Tony illegally browse through government systems and illegally punch up video of Loki's cell. One day he'd have to pick his brain about his UI.

"Captain Rogers?"

Loki looked up at the camera when Natasha started talking. They were kind of cozy, him and the Captain, on opposite ends of the room but obviously in some kind of ceasefire because the camera
was sharp enough to pick up that Steve was drawing Loki and Loki was letting him and holding still enough that he might even be posing. It was bizarre, but in a good way, and better than he expected. Not a bloodbath. Great.

"Hi, Agent. All's peace and quiet down here. Is it time?"

"We've got a few questions for Loki. Loki, nod if you can hear us."

They watched him tip his head toward another camera and give it a flat stare.

"How good is his hearing, anyway? Did anyone test that? Can we test that?"

"Shut it, Stark. Loki, this is Commander Fury."

An eyebrow. Loki could probably teach a class in contempt.

"I'm gonna keep it short. Do you have children?"

Loki -- flinched, that was the best word. Something about his body went wrong, angled like no human body should.

Eventually he tipped his head down.

"That a yes?"

He stared at the first camera this time, shifting so his hands were balanced on his knees, uncurling them to lie flat. Slowly, very slowly, he nodded.

If looks could kill, Bruce would already be the other guy.

"Commander Fury, if I may. Would you draw them, please?" Captain said, and he was flipping to another page, smoothing it out. "It doesn't have to be much, but if you can, we'd appreciate it. I'd really appreciate it, personally. Uh, for more lead, the core, just press the button."

Loki, wonder of wonders, actually took it and the mechanical pencil. Tony found the right angle to look over Loki's shoulder and Bruce saw Natasha stifle a noise.

On the page was a horse's head, and in quick lines beneath it eight legs. Beside it was a set of lines that were filled in to become a wolf with long teeth, and beside that a circle that was possibly a serpent, scales barely sketched in. Above them both was a face crowned with long hair, or half a face, no details in the eye but a death-head's grin on the side that was missing.

It was all very lightly drawn, like it could be wiped away with a sneeze, and Loki looked fiercely intent.

It was the wistful brush of his fingers over the girl's face once he stopped drawing that did it for Bruce, and he got up and went to the bar, pouring himself water from the tap. It was too personal. Just too fucking personal.

Loki hadn't drawn any of them as adults.

They were pictures of babies.

Bruce came back to the table in time to see Loki shove the sketchpad across the floor like it burned him, and Steve settle with it in his lap, amazingly calm for being in what was basically a strongbox with a crazy god.
He got the impression Steve was used to dealing with very proud people.

''Thank you. They're beautiful,'' Steve said, and Loki snorted through his nose, hands pinched between his knees now. ''Well, I think so. See, we ... I don't know how it is now, but in the time I come from, we take care of our kids. We don't send them off to fight so young and we don't take them away from people who take care of them. I know, sounds like sentimentality, right? But it wasn't. It's what we did. We took care of our own. Because it was the right thing to do.''

''Watch it, Cap,'' Clint said, and yeah, Loki did look like he was about to let all the cats out, face veering so fast from expression to expression that it was impossible for Bruce to tell if he was about to attack Cap or maybe just cry and then kill him. It settled into a magnificent sneer.

Fury stepped in. ''Loki. Are you old enough to fight in Asgard?''

Loki rolled his eyes, somehow encompassing the entire base.

''Taking that as a yes. Are you an adult by Asgard standards?''

He made a complicated gesture, then shook his head.

''Were you considered old enough to have children when you had yours?''

That got a grudging refusal and Steve a bothered glare like he held him personally responsible.

''Ah, yeah, right. Sorry. I know it sounds obvious, but we're not from Asgard, so we have to ask obvious questions. I understand it's tedious. It seems like you love them a lot, there's nothing wrong with that, but did you want to have them?''

Loki froze, then started laughing, strangling through the muzzle, saliva dripping as he loudly struggled for breath and clutched his knees to his chest.

Seriously. Contempt classes.

''Is it more complicated than you can tell us?'' Steve sounded genuine even to Bruce. Maybe he was.

Loki gave a lazy wave toward the sketchbook and settled himself, visibly withdrawing in favour of sniggering into his borrowed sweats.

Fury reached out and muted the comm.

Bruce cleared his throat, disturbed by the sight of Loki twitching soundlessly on the screen. ''Not facts, but uh...''

''Convinced yet?'' Tony said. ''I dunno, maybe we need to ask him what horse dick feels like. Never have I ever...''

''You're awfully fixated, Stark. Do you want to tell us something?''

''I still don't like you.''

''Can it. You got questions, I got questions, everybody's got questions. I will ask some in an official capacity and that's it. This goes south, I'm holding you all personally responsible.''

Clint gave a thumbs up. ''You got it, sir.''

''God help us all. Find out where those kids are. Romanova, you're with me. Dig Thor out of the
fanboy department." Fury glared down at the camera. "And somebody get that kid a damn shower."
Clint lost the shower draw by process of elimination.

Four SHIELD guards around the perimeter and Clint ready to shoot, the surrounding rooms cleared except for another four guards at each compass point, and the ones in the room with him were still giving the naked god in the doorless, screenless cubicle nervous, darting glances.

Apparently watching him shit with his legs gently crossed and thoughtfully contemplating the tiles was weirder than anything they'd ever seen and somehow it was a reason to gawk. Clint wanted to smack them all and send them to Nat for retraining. He'd mention it to their supervisor after they got Loki parked.

"That's hot, that's cold. Combine them to get a temperature you like. Water's going to come out cold at first anyway."

He took a half-seat on one of the sinks and settled in as Loki leaned into a freezing cold shower with a blissful little noise that was just wrong, wrong, wrong.

Clint almost killed him at several points for taking so fucking long over everything. Did he have to clean between every fucking toe twice, really? Did he have to fingercomb his eyebrows?

The smug fuck kept smirking.

Then he washed his toes again and one of the agents snapped and hit the cold shutoff, twisting the hot water all the way to the left. "Take that, asshole."

There was a tiny sad noise as Loki's skin puffed into sheets of papery blisters from shoulder to knee, and Loki looked triumphant.

"Jesus Christ." Clint lunged and reversed it, drenching Loki with cold water again and staring. It looked awful. He rounded on the agent. "Jesus. What is wrong with you? Get out of here. Get the hell out."

Loki was still insufferably smug when he turned around, and Clint knew exactly why and furthermore couldn't blame him for being smug because someone had fallen for his cheap trolling under Clint's watch. Nat was going to have his head.

"Yeah, yeah, you're pretty, just get out and dry off," he said, pointing his bow at the towel folded by the cubicle and leaning on the sink again.

Loki gestured to himself, eyebrows raised and almost playful, so unselfconsciously naked that Clint
was starting to feel like he should be uncomfortable on his behalf.

So he did the worst thing he could and leered, careful to keep it sarcastic. "Clothes right there, dude."

It was almost like working together while he'd been megaminded -- it had been so easy to fall into step with Loki, their battles effortlessly pieced together in tune to the hum of a truth that swallowed the world and Clint with it.

But not now, and never again.

"Come and sit." He toed a panel on the wall and a chair unfolded from the floor, steel and titanium and bolted past the tile and into the structure of the base.

Loki did, but made it obvious he didn't like it. Too bad.

Clint got him bound and strapped down, bands under his arms and across his waist, hips, thighs, shins and ankles. Between that and the SHIELD guards circled around at his back, Loki wasn't going anywhere.

He shoved a bucket in his lap and pressed his head forward. "Hold that and keep still. Gonna get this off."

Time to see what Thor slapped on Loki that made him so easy to lead around.

It took two of them to get the back unbuckled or unsoldered or whatever it was, and it peeled back from his head in a way that was creepily helpful.

Clint eased it from around his mouth, then felt tugs, and shifted to look straight down, absently putting a finger under Loki's chin to lift it.

There was a row of cables in Loki's cheeks, embedded deep and pulling when Clint moved the gag, and plates under the gag's shell that were fitted against his teeth like mouthguards. Clint eased his jaw open, disturbed as the plates slipped out, shiny with spit and blood from their sharp edges, and he saw there were strands from the shell reaching between the plates into Loki's mouth.

"Hold that," he told Loki, and wasn't surprised when he did, clutching it at a level that wouldn't tug on whatever was inside. Clint would cooperate too.

Unhooking his cheeks had to be done first and it wasn't easy -- they were barbed on the inside, of all things, and he had to tug and work at them with too many thumbs in his mouth before they came free, pus and blood bubbling from the puncture wounds and bits of skin caught on the hooks. The wounds looked like the cables had been stabbed through first and the barbs unfurled on the inside just to make very sure that Loki wouldn't try to push them out.

Clint didn't blame Loki for the sound he made when they started on the other side.

"Almost done," he told him.

Now for whatever was at the front, and Loki watched him as Clint slowly pulled and Loki's tongue followed, so swollen opening his jaw enough to let it through squeezed pus down his face.

Some of that swelling was whatever was snarled inside, though, and Clint got a lipstick light and had a look under. Same setup as the cheeks, punctured right through from the underside of his tongue, barbs hooked into his tongue from the top. But they were placed so that if Clint pulled them out like he'd done with his cheeks, they'd take Loki's tongue with them. There were merits to the idea, but...
not worth it.

There were no catches, no releases or buttons or twists or parts like there'd been on the back to open up the shell of the thing. Apparently it was working exactly as intended.

Being this angry was such a relief over the detached hate. He could work with being angry.

"Hold still. You don't want me to miss," he said baldly, and took a scalpel and the lipstick light, one of the guards steadying Loki with hands either side of his head.

It was slow, painstaking, bloody work, but the look on Loki's face as his eyes fluttered shut, the shake of his lips as he could breathe freely for the first time in days -- that alone made it worth doing.

Of course then he started puking and coughing, but nobody could have everything and at least he was doing it into the bucket.

The skin on his face where the gag was looked corpse-damp, and around his mouth it was pulpy to the touch. Clint got him to wash his mouth out and took another look. The insides of his lips were slashed, not enough for stitches but enough for hefty antiseptics, and his tongue -- well, at least it had the chance to heal now.

Eventually, though, Clint picked up the gag from where he'd tossed it into the sink and ran water over it, handling it gingerly. The barbs were tucked tight against the inside now, circular thorns like evil rosettes, and it clinked where he had it pinched between thumb and forefinger; probably a spool somewhere in there.

Loki was watching him, and still hadn't said a word, but he didn't even look surprised that Clint might shove it back on. He looked like he was expecting it, steadily getting more annoyed and confused the longer Clint held it and stared at him, and Clint might hate him, did hate him, but there was no-one in the world, on any world, he hated that much.

He made an executive decision.

"I'm not putting this back on you. I am going to touch up your face with this," holding up a roll of bandages, "it's just gauze, so your face won't get infected. But this -- SHIELD doesn't do this. We don't do this. Thor might put it back on if and when he takes you to Asgard, but I'm sure as fuck not Thor and I'm not going to. I don't care who you are."

Loki was frowning over the bandages Clint was securing around his mouth. It was easy enough to guess why.

"We didn't know," Clint told him. "Now we do. See how that works?" He thumped the panel again to release the straps and Loki got up, eyeing all of them in a way that was frankly distrustful and probably deserved. They hadn't even thought to ask why Loki hadn't just slipped it off the first chance he got.

That burned a little, the way the gag wrapped up in a pocket burned against his hip -- it was surprisingly light for something so evil -- but at least Loki had sheets and a blanket when they got back to the cell, and somebody practical had changed out the air.

Someone impractical, probably Cap, had left a stack of books. Clint glanced at the titles, smirking. Loki probably didn't give a shit about Dickens.

The guards rotated out and new ones took up position, and Loki stood in the middle of it all, eyes fixed and blazingly suspicious on his.
Clint gave nothing back to confirm or deny, only turned away and touched the comm as the door slid closed behind him. "Nat, I'm gatecrashing. Something's come up."

There were eight shortcuts to Fury's meeting room from here, and he swung up into one, waved to a passing and very startled scientist, and unwrapped it as he approached the doors, shoving them open and tossing the gag onto the table between Thor and Fury, both up out of their chairs and breaking out of yelling at each other to look.

Never let it be said Clint didn't know how to make an entrance.

Even if Nat was rolling her eyes at him, she looked grateful, which meant she'd probably been a few seconds away from saying something nasty to shut up the torrent of testosterone.

"I got Loki that shower, sir. Turns out that fancy-looking gag is a scold's bridle done up with barbed wire." He flicked his hand at it, and a photo he'd taken of the damage done to Loki's mouth and face landed beside it. "Thought we didn't torture prisoners."

Thor was seething, hand flexing like he was going to call Mjolnir any second. "How dare you remove the silencer? You do not know what lies he is capable of --"

"Oh, I think we'll manage. Question is, what are you capable of?" Fury looked pissed.

Clint went to sit by Nat, who had picked up the gag and was delicately examining it with an interest that alternated between disgusted and fascinated.

"You know nothing," Thor snarled, making the sort of angry gestures that proceeded bar brawls. "He cannot be allowed free."

Fury was just getting more and more unimpressed with every passing moment, and Clint sat back to enjoy the show. He still owed Thor for scaring the shit out of him and Tony -- it was a good bet that none of them, Thor included, actually knew if he would have killed him without Clint stepping in, and that was just unacceptable in a SHIELD team.

Nat nudged his hand, and he leaned over to see the scans Bruce took pulled up on the seat's tablet, the front and profile xrays of Loki's face a mass of white metal and bone and ghostly eye sockets. She was turning the gag over in her hands, and after a moment he understood and wished he hadn't.

It curved so completely, so solidly built and impenetrable, that they would've had to xray straight down from the top of his head to see anything more than just a bit of metal. Nice.

A thump from the head of the table made him look up, and Fury was glowering about six inches from Thor's face.

"Am I just talking for the sake of it? That is not what I said. I am saying your little gadget there is the opposite of helping."

"It is for your sake," Thor growled, and like this, the air crackling, Clint could believe he was a god. "It is for the sake of Midgard, and for the Avengers, and for this realm. He cannot be allowed to speak. He lies, son of Fury. He lies."

"You ain't exactly been honest with me either. When were you planning to inform me? Or is that just acceptable to you people?"

There was the hammer, right there, and Clint heard Natasha murmur urgently into her comm for the rest of the team to tool along.
"You are not listening. Hear me --"

"Oh, I'm very interested in what you have to say."

"Hear me well," Thor said, gritting his teeth. "All of you. None of this is your decision to make. This is Asgard justice, and he must answer to it. I am acting as I must to protect your people. Your misunderstanding is proof of your ignorance, not my wrongdoing. On Asgard --"

"This. Isn't. Asgard. You listen. What you say might go on Asgard, but that is not going to fly as long as you are here and not there, do you understand? He is in a SHIELD cell in SHIELD custody and I am the director of SHIELD. I make the decisions here. And you, as long as you are part of the Avengers Initiative, are just going to have to suck it up and deal with it."

Clint had to give it to Fury: he had chops.

Thor looked fit to kill, and his voice was soft, his grin savage. Clint's hair was standing on end. "Your tone is unwise, mortal."

"More than sticking that on him?" pointing at the gag in Nat's hands. "I don't think so. You might not be a whole lot familiar with how things work around here, so I'm gonna tell you right now: SHIELD is not in the business of torturing children."

"You do not know who he is, what he has done!"

"I don't fucking care who he is. I care that I wouldn't put your toy on a goddamn baby born doll."

"You have no right to command me," hammer slipping until he had a firm grip, fingers twitching. "We wish peace with your people."

Fury spread his hands, taking a step back and lifting his chin in challenge. "Taking a swing at me's a hell of a way to prove it."

Thor looked down like he hadn't even realised, and when he did he shuddered exactly once. "You do not know," he said, almost pleading. "He is my brother, and his mind is lost. It is no worse than I must do. Do you not think it hurt me to see him this way?"

Fury's eye was a gimlet gaze. "I'm thinking it hurt him a hell of a lot more."

He scoffed at that. "You speak of things you do not understand. You would stand here defending him while your realm falls, and speak among the ruins of how you did not know. You do know. He has shown you!"

Clint coughed politely. "I don't see him getting up to much at the moment."

Nat tipped her head, shrugging. The tablet in front of her showed Loki's cell now, and Loki was curled on the mattress under his blanket, holding something open. "Looks like he's reading."

Thor looked flabbergasted, distracted from the mutter of Steve's voice through Nat's comm. "You would give study to a a master of tricks? This is madness. You are all mad."

"We're doing what we think is right. Your right and mine might not match up, but I ain't calling you crazy for yours, so I'd thank you to back off on mine."

He sighed, Mjolnir swinging lazily at his side, and his mouth was tight with resentment. "You still do not command me."
"Then we have a problem, don't we?"

"He must face Asgard."

"I ain't arguing with that."

"Then what would you have me do?" The air was crackling again. "You cannot contain him, you refuse to stopper his silver tongue, you speak of torture -- you yourself asked me what I would allow!"

Ah. Now Fury -- now Fury was incensed, that was the word. Clint subtly edged away from the table. "You are joking."

Thor growled. "Do not deny your intent."

"What the hell did you think I was asking? We interrogated him. Agent Romanova's damn good at her job, but if you think I'd send anybody in with Loki to torture him while he's laughing at the whole damn boat, you must think I'm damn stupid."

"I do not know what to think of you," Thor said evenly, "other than that you may be a fool."

"A fool, huh? If that means I'm not the sort of person to go around happily torturing little kids, I'm finding I'm surprisingly okay with that."

"You think I --"

Clint saw Natasha dive under the table and strung an arrow even as the roar of lighting whitened out the room and the clang of unyielding force meeting immovable object threw his hearing for a loop. When his eyes cleared, Fury was standing stock-still, and Cap was between them, shield raised. Stark was beside him in the full suit, palms open.

"Thor, please put the hammer down," Steve said.

"Yeah, this guy's a shitbag, but he's kind of grown on me, I don't wanna break in a new one. Calm the fuck down."

Thor stepped back and sank into a chair, Mjolnir clutched between his eyes, and his entire body sagged. "He is my brother."

Steve lowered the shield a few inches. "We get that. But we've got ... different ideas going on here. I mean, Asgard, Earth, there's going to be some differences, right? Let's just talk and sort this all out."

"But seriously, put the hammer down."

Thor shuddered again and let go, sitting back and swallowing hard, hands flexing on the reinforced arms of the chair.

Everyone in the room let out the breaths they were holding, including Clint. Pissed off gods were scary. Who knew?

"Good job. Stand down, Tony, we're fine. All right, take a seat, everyone. You're all right, Director Fury?"

"Yeah, yeah. Good timing." The eyepatch seemed a little less fixed than usual.
Steve smiled a little and chivvied him -- Clint wasn't exactly sure how, but he did -- into standing at the front of the table.

"Oh, what's that you've got there?" he said, reaching for the bit of metal that'd started this mess, or maybe just kicked off the latest installment.

Shit. They'd forgotten about Cap.

Nat met his eyes and he knew she was also two seconds away from taking a day and just getting hammered.

"That's the gag I took off Loki about an hour ago," Clint said, lowering the bow. Still nocked, though. No need to tempt anything.

Steve cradled it and looked very, very old all of a sudden. "Ah. That's ..." He smiled a bit again. "It's -- very precise. Uh -- it looks painful. Is that a picture?"

Natasha slid it over to him, and Steve stared at it, getting sadder and sadder by the second. Thor was going to get the world's worst Disappointed Face in a minute.

Tony leaned over his shoulder and jerked, then popped up the faceplate. "Whoa. What the fuck? Oh, no, no, that shit is just not on, I didn't sign up for this --"

"Nobody did," Steve said softly, and he looked up at Fury, Disappointed Face in full swing. "What happened?"

Fury, of course, nodded to Thor. Mutinous, stubborn Thor, with his arms folded across his chest like he was sulking. Maybe he was. It wasn't like he was that much older than Loki, was it?

Fuck, they were dealing with a pair of brats who didn't know any better.

Clint was going to get hammered this weekend and nobody was allowed to stop him. He'd invite Nat. They'd sit around, getting hammered, and talk about kittens or something. Happy kittens. Youtube was a definite requirement. They'd put on the ten hours of nyan cat video and synch it up with Foreigner. It'd be great.

"Thor?"

Yup. Full-blast, full-powered disappointment.

Thor sank in his chair like curdled milk. "He is my brother."

"No-one's denying that. That's true. It's also true that right now he's our prisoner, and there's things that we're ... that I'm just not comfortable with doing. Even if you think they're necessary. I'm not comfortable with this," tapping the gag and pushing it across the table to Thor. "So I'm going to trust you and ask that this stays off until whenever you take him back. Once he's in your custody, your rules apply, and if you think it's necessary, we don't have the power to stop you. But right now, he's in ours, and I -- like I said, I'm not comfortable."

They weren't going to stop him yet, Clint added in the privacy of his head. They still hadn't figured out where to even start looking for alternatives.

"We're not offering asylum. We can't do that, I don't think anybody thinks we can. He's a god and he's a war criminal, and people are already upset. And we're people, we're not gods. It doesn't make sense. But we are going to keep him here for a while until we figure some things out, and while that's
happening, I'd really like it if you didn't use it against my wishes. You're powerful, you're a great asset to the team. I'd hate to lose you."

It was kind of funny how Thor melted under the mum-guilt lecture until he was almost dripping off the chair, sullen and giving in but determined not to until he was begged enough to make it look like he was doing them a favour.

And right on cue: "I know you don't agree, but you don't have to. I'm asking you to keep it to yourself for the sake of the team. Can you do that?"

"Fine," Thor grumbled, sitting up and trying to pretend he hadn't just been soundly beaten by Sad Disappppointed Eyes and I Trust You To Be Good. "I have warned you. On your head be it."

Captain was a master at this shit. It was fucking beautiful.

"Thank you, Thor," like butter wouldn't melt at all.

Thor stormed out. The gag went with him.

"That," Tony said, gazing at Cap with rapt attention, "was so sexy."

Cap blushed and stammered. "I -- er -- not really --"

"No, seriously, that was hot. You're like Pepper. If Pepper was a dude. How do you do that?"

Fury rolled his eye. "I am gonna go take a fucking liedown. You are going to stay out of trouble for two hours. Give it a try. You just might like it."

Nat grabbed Stark's arm and towed him out. "I'll watch Loki. You need to show Selvig your progress on the magic cell."

"Oh, do I? But he's so boring." Tony made complaining faces but went along.

It left Steve alone with Clint, and he got up from the table and gave Clint a quick nod, mouth drawn white. "Good job."

"You okay, Cap?"

Steve gave a strange little laugh that set goosebumps rippling up Clint's arms. "Oh, I guess. I just -- sometimes I wish they left me in the ice, that's all."

"Cap, that's not --"

"I'm fine. They got me more punching bags, so," and he shadow-boxed a little. "I'll work it off. Take care of yourself, Agent."

"You too," but Steve was walking away like he was Atlas or something, weight of the world and seventy years on his shoulders, and Clint looked at Loki, serenely reading in his cell and probably completely oblivious to the drama, hell, he probably had no idea why it could ever be a big deal, and switched off the screen.

What a mess.
Natasha dropped Stark off into the tender hands of Selvig, who immediately latched on and started being excited! about! science!

And then they were both excited, and given Selvig's new interpretations of the data he'd got from the Tesseract, Stark had every reason in the world to be busy and out of Fury's circle of rage for the requested two hours.

She knew the signs of an upcoming confrontation with principles, and wisely chose to be out of the way. Principles like Fury's took some wrangling even in the midst of an argument, and Loki's probable minor status was a very loud argument. Loki's cell was conveniently very far out of Fury's warpath, and she dragged a chair, a packet of potato chips, a pen and a notebook to the walkway connecting his door to the rest of the facility and sat down, opening the packet.

It was a chips day. That wasn't the only reason, of course. There was also that it humanised her to her watchers, reassured the guards both in giving them something to focus on and taking Loki's focus off them, and satisfied Clint, who mothered her into eating his stews if she didn't deliberately eat on camera at least once a week. But of course that was incidental to why she had chips at all. Naturally. It wasn't as though she cared about Clint's opinion of her tendency to forget about things like food and normal needs for energy. Nope.

She could sell bridges in Kazakhastan for a living at this rate, and she wrote that down with a wry slant of her latest exercise in handwriting.

Writing out her surface thoughts was one of those things she'd got into the habit of as a teenager. Diaries had been the thing at the time in the country she was spying in, and a girl with a diary was overlooked a lot of the time in the assumption that she just wanted a quiet place to write down her deepest, innermost feelings. It had been pink, and closed with a ridiculously fragile heart-shaped lock, and she'd burned it along with half of her hair in a firefight in Riga once the target had taken the bait.

And now she was writing again, careful to prop it on her thigh out of Loki's sight-line, and she was writing about ... she wasn't sure, really. How much she liked the chips, or the terrible weather, or how it'd felt to hold the sceptre and feel it rise in her mind like a thrown grenade, bouncing gently off all her defenses and waiting, waiting for her to crack and let it explode.

Probably not that last one.

When she looked up Loki was pressed against the clear wall of his cell, fist above his head and eyes intent on her. She had no doubt that the replica of his pose during her interrogation was deliberate.

Natasha deigned to raise an eyebrow.
He glanced at the diary, then at her, and stepped back, hands lowering with the palms spread outward. She recognised that, too: tell me.

"I'm writing about you," she said, and felt for a chip, bending to fish it out of where the bag sat against the leg of her chair. "I'd read it out, but it's in Russian."

She amused him. Good. He amused her; he was almost as good at dissembling as she was at fourteen. Almost. He still had a sense of self, and if he was in the field as she'd been, it would've been a terrible liability. Natalya was long dead, though, and right now she was Natasha Romanova, Black Widow, codenamed for an insect and so, so tired of monsters.

She let him see it just for the way his eyes narrowed and his hand pressed between them, scenting blood, anticipating bait.

But his eyes widened and his face soured, and his body closed down so completely into resentment she was nearly impressed. He was, she recalled, extremely open with everyone else. A little more open with Clint, a little more expressive with Rogers, but overall he had good dynamic range.

Not so with Thor. It was all contempt and hurt, all the time, and she? She was in Thor's way.

On purpose.

It was her job.

No prizes for knowing who was coming, and she looked up to see him standing a little away from her just out of her arm's reach but not his, tall and broad and somber.

He was staring at Loki, and the hand that wasn't holding Mjolnir held a scrap of metal.

"I gave my word," he said, quiet and gruff, when she slowly tensed. "I wished to see him."

Loki had moved away, arms folded across his chest and staring at her. Waiting to see what she would do, what Thor would do.

The earlier interrogation with Loki had been dangerous but nowhere near as dangerous as this.

"Has he been ... difficult?" Thor studied her, searching her face.

"No," Natasha said, the truth easy to give.

Thor seemed to think it over, and she glanced back at Loki, finding him still focused on her, still waiting, alert for -- something. Betrayal, perhaps. Expectations made it easier to betray someone that didn't trust you than most people thought possible.

"You are troubled," he said. "If I have given offense --" He broke off, then half-turned to her, brow creased.

She knew he was waiting for her to disagree and fall into the role of patching it all over with reassuring noises, and she wasn't about to give it. Not her job.

"You do not understand. His lies ... he lied to me while I was banished. He lied to me about everything, everyone. His lies would have destroyed Jotunheim beyond repair. My father scryed its surface, and it is ... damaged. A shell. It came so close to not existing at all. I was almost too late."

She recognised that guilt and still she didn't fill in the gaps he left for her to soothe him. Thor already told Phil about Jotunheim, and Phil had told her. More than enough time to work through her
conclusions and find places to put them.

Thor stumbled on a breath, obviously not finding the sympathetic audience he'd wanted.

"He is dangerous. You must not underestimate him."

Natasha looked up at him. "We aren't. There's an Avenger with him almost all the time, we've got round-the-clock guards, if he tries to break out there's a whole lot of desert out there to die in." It amused her that the Avengers once thought there was only one cell built like the one aboard the helicarrier. There were three, and one of them was right here in Arizona. It was a better bet than keeping him in Stark Tower. "What we're not doing is torturing him. I was there too. I closed the portal. I saw."

He looked frustrated enough to swear as she'd never heard him, and for lack of a chair he leaned against the railing, arms folded.

"It is necessary. He is clever, and you are mortals. You are human. You do not have a suit or strength, but you are here and too close. Why will you not protect yourself?" He gestured, hands strangely empty without Mjolnir. "It is madness."

Natasha considered Loki. Loki, who was crazy, and vicious, and tortured, and probably had as many cats in his head as she did in hers. He probably hadn't codenames for them, but it wasn't all that different.

Loki, who wasn't human, was so not-human that finding commonality with him was like overtures of friendship from an iceberg. Deadly, deadly, deadly. But not, she thought, treacherous.

Thor, who she had liked, until she saw his hands and mapped them to Loki's face in her mind's eye, seeing precisely how he could have held him down to sew shut his mouth. How his weight would have been distributed; how he would have tied careful knots in each stitch and blamed Loki for struggling.

She knew men like Thor, and she'd killed many without regret.

"You were born knowing you were a god, right?"

Thor gave a confused nod. "Of course. I am Thor Odinsson."

"Yeah, it's not the same for us. A lot of the time, people have to convince themselves they're people. We make codes and if we follow them well enough we call ourselves human. If we don't, we call ourselves monsters. Even if we lie and kill in the service of liars and killers," and here she heard Loki scoff, "and a lot of things haunt us, we make our own rules. Sometimes they help."

Thor looked poleaxed. "You do not know who you are? How can that be?"

Loki laughed in his cell.

He whirled on him. "Be silent."

"Hey. That's not your call," she said, deliberately warning, and she saw Loki's sudden interest.

He nodded, stiff. "I apologise, Natasha. You may continue."

"Romanova," she corrected. Thor didn't have the privilege of being familiar with her. "There are a lot of people like Loki. Not gods, and not always to the same scale, but there have been many."
They're often charismatic and very charming, silver-tongued even, but I can tell you from experience that SHIELD does not torture them." She shrugged. "We don't have to."

Thor eyed her like he had no idea what to make of her. He probably didn't. She wasn't Lady Sif, marching with a sword and shield and cutting down enemies at the front lines. But here she was. Powerful. No sword or shield in sight other than the logo on her paperwork.

"You speak, and yet you do not make sense," he said slowly, more incredulous with every word. "Do you mean to say you hold this against me?"

"Yes. I do."

Out of the corner of her eye Loki looked like he couldn't decide if to laugh or mock. Good. The longer he was off-balance, the longer Thor didn't have Loki's resentment to lean on, and the longer he might listen to her.

"I don't know about the others, but you did something in my name that I don't agree with. You didn't ask us. You just did it. I don't find that acceptable."

"There was no time to ask --"

"That's what you want to think," she said flatly, interrupting him sharply enough that she saw him recoil from her audacity. Good. "We had a few minutes before Clint poked him awake. There was time to say something and you didn't. You chose not to."

Thor growled. "I did what was right. None of you would have."

"That's one of the reasons it was wrong to do it. Doing it in the name of the Avengers threatens our codes. It threatens how we think of ourselves. Whether we're people or we're monsters. It wasn't your choice to make."

"Mortals," Thor said, and he shook his head to himself. "I love you dearly, but you are foolish and taxing. I lose hope that any of you will understand Asgard."

She bit into a chip and considered him, then shrugged. "I understand you've never denied that he's a child."

"Youth is no excuse. He is old enough to understand his wrongs."

"Old enough to answer for them?"

Thor's face hardened. "Yes."

Natasha raised an eyebrow. "Why did you come here?"

"To see my brother. And to see his face. Though you have hidden it."

"You do know what the gag does?"

He made an impatient noise. "Of course. It is used many times. A disobedient subject must be taught to hold their tongue in the presence of betters. Its removal is a time of celebration."

Natasha wished, very much, not to be having this conversation. So very much.

He'd used a slave's punishment on his brother. That was just disrespectful, dark implications aside, and of those -- she could guess who counted as a disobedient subject and who didn't. Oh, she could.
If Thor claimed a little more of the feudal lord rights he claimed to have, she could easily be treated as one herself. It was right there in his hand.

She still wasn't going to move. Thor didn't come close to the Hulk. Ever.

"Your people don't let a lot of people live very long, do they?" She studied him. "You have children, but a lot of them die."

"Yes. In battle, in the home --" He flicked his fingers. "A weak babe will not become a strong warrior. When I was young we warred with Jotunheim. Strength was most important. I have begun to consider otherwise with my father's influence, but it is still strange to court weakness."

Her head spun a little, frantically connecting old knowledge with new ones and threading conjecture after conjecture. And Loki looked bored. Either Thor was approaching a trap, or he'd already run into it.

In the end, though, she knew there was one thing that would decide her opinion one way or the other.

"Do you have regrets?"

"No. I have done my best, for good or ill. I have tried, with my brother. That it has come to no good -- I am not to blame." Thor frowned at Loki, who reared back, half-wild. "Despite what his witchcraft conjures."

Natasha tested her pen on a corner of the page, ink dried on the tip, incidentally aware of being caught between two gods, of the guards with itchy fingers and the weight of her own weaponry.

But she remembered the scans, the gag, how bone-thin he was. The way Loki resisted the IV needle so ferociously they'd had to get him most of his food and water through the NG instead, and how he'd stood for hours afterwards, trying to stay awake rather than touch the floor.

She saw the way he looked at her right now, seeming to agree with Thor that she was a crazy mortal woman interfering in things that were none of business, despite the fact that he'd heard the entire conversation himself. She saw what he'd been holding close the entire time she'd kept guard.

Natasha was in the position of defending someone who'd killed a thousand people and rising as rescue services dug through the wreckage, and that clinched it.

"Then in that case I think we're done."

"What?"

"I have nothing to say to you."

It was like he'd never been dismissed by a woman in his life, but he remembered himself, sputtered, and left. "Goodbye, mortal." It would be scathing if it weren't so absurdly painless.

Loki's unwavering stare burned against the side of her head as she continued to write of things she didn't remember knowing.

"Why?" said a muffled voice, hoarse and thick like blood, urgently echoing against steel glass.

"Why?"

She didn't answer. She couldn't.
There was a portrait of four missing children crumpled by Loki's feet, and Natasha didn't know their names.
"My genius is so underappreciated," Tony mourned. Beside him Selvig coughed and brushed at his burnt eyebrows. "What do you say we demo what happens when we switch the proportions? Jarvis!"

"Won't work, not enough stability. And this time you start it."

"It's a sacrifice in the name of science. Be proud!" Tony actually got a good look at him and stared. "You look like a baboon."

Bruce choked, and Selvig slid a glare Tony's way. "I won't say what you look like."

Tony grinned and got Jarvis to demo it anyway.

Selvig was boring, but bouncing him between him and Bruce made it a lot easier to tune into the chatter rather than wish for AC/DC to think to.

It helped that Steve was rhythmically thumping through the sheets of materials he'd had painted in colours according to their thickness and composition and carted in the night before with another lot arriving during the confrontation with Thor, calling out which ones and how long they lasted under his punches. He was already starting to get used to having the Avengers on his comm, a shared band between the group of them, and it felt strange.

But kinda good.

Anything good helped now. Selvig's Tesseract data was amazingly interesting to an astrophysicist, but not so interesting to an engineer, and it took the three of them translating back and forth with a lot of flailing and grabbing at Jarvis' projections to translate the concepts.

Part of the problem was that Selvig was brilliant, Tony admitted to himself. Fucking brilliant. No style, no persona, the definition of 'good natured and unassuming' -- but when he got going, Tony had to keep up, and he'd seen Bruce having to stop and flail trying to relate back more often than not. Selvig understood the Tesseract better than probably anyone in the world except Loki. Maybe better, in practical terms, since he'd done most of the work, and he'd basically had to invent a whole lot of terminology and alter a lot of basic concepts -- like physics, and gravity, and time -- to start doing anything with it.

Okay, so Tony lied.

It was fascinating and he was so, so jealous.

The problem -- one of them, there were too many fucking problems right now -- was that Steve
sounded like he was getting angrier, not calmer, and his punching was taking on a distinct this-is-a-
certain-blonde-someone's-face quality.

"Steve? Steve, the sheeting's dead. You killed it."

Howard talked about Captain America as the kind of guy who burned hot and slow when he was
pissed, and hearing it now, yeah, he got what he meant.

"Sorry," he said, and the comm picked up how hard he was panting. "I just -- I don't know. This is
wrong."

"Yeah, yeah," Tony sighed, watching Bruce corner Selvig into comparative analysis of Thor, Loki
and the Tesseract's gamma radiation. They'd found six key zones that signified 'magic', and so far
they were able to block four with careful, careful calibration. But the last two made things explode
without the influence of the others, which wasn't something he needed, thanks. Stark Tower didn't
need more refurbishing, he was going to be hearing workmen in his sleep for months as it was.

"If Fury gives him back to Asgard, I'm resigning. From the Avengers, from SHIELD, all of it. We
took people out. We didn't give them back."

"Actually? Me too," Clint said, and Tony jumped. He'd forgotten Clint was listening. "Well, kind of.
I'm not actually allowed. But I'll be a pain in their ass. I know how, trust me."

Selvig! Selvig! What is this?"

"Resonance!"

"Fuck," Tony said. The problem was stopping magic from passing either way. One way, fine. Both?
Hell of a lot harder. Especially when they reproduced the readings as close as they could and things
fucking exploded. He was tired of explosions.

"But yeah, you all come to my place and we'll privatise interstellar peace. It'll be awesome. Loki can
consult. We'll bribe him with showers. Have you seen his hair today? The shithead's preening."

Steve gave a hopeless sort of laugh. "I don't see how. I meant it -- SHIELD can't give him asylum.
He's killed so many people and Thor doesn't understand enough to entertain the idea. How could
they agree? Can they?"

"Uh, no, not if Fury wants to avoid having the whole thing shut down. He's kinda ... you know.
Grim. Grimmer." Tony made a face. Fury's expression hadn't boded well. But! There was a chance.
If they had enough time.

He hated not knowing how much time.

"It might not come to that," Natasha said, suspiciously serene. "I just told Thor to go fuck himself. In
not so many words."

"Go, Nat!"

"I wanted to do that," Tony whined.

"Is that ... smart?" Bruce said. "I mean, he's ... you know."

"Just establishing character." He could almost hear Romanova dusting off her shoulders and being
smug. "But it was quite satisfying."

"How does that help us?" Steve said, and he sounded mostly confused instead of mostly angry, which was good, Tony could work with that.

"It means that Thor's going to avoid her. And since we're all taking shifts babysitting... well, we'd hate for him to see an empty cell, wouldn't we?"

"What?"

Tony made an annoyed noise. "Peer review? Use testing? Am the only one who cares about, oh, not being blown up in our sleep if he has a hissy fit? Simulations aren't like the real thing."

"Wait, wait, I'm ... I'm lost. You're going to take him out of his cell?"

"Yeeees."

"To test his magic on your ... shield thing?"

"Yes! Although we just have to calibrate again, but I bet you anything he's figured out how to get around the cuffs by now. You can have my shareholders if I'm wrong. Get with the program, fuddy-duddy."

"Can you do that?"

"Oh, well, you know, technically, maybe not so much, but nobody cares. I don't care, so nobody else care either. Easy."

Selvig was giving him one of the most incredulous complicated faces Tony had ever seen, including that time with Pepper and the strawberries.

"You're going to let Loki free?"

Tony threw up his hands. "Is nobody listening today?"

Bruce cleared his throat. "It's more, uh ... relocation. I think."

"For God's sake, why?" Aghast, that was what Selvig was. It wasn't a good look with the eyebrows or lack of.

"Because," Tony said, "I'm not a complete douchebag." He pointed. "Don't repeat that. I have a reputation."

That got him an eyeroll, and that was good, Bruce looked like he might almost smile if someone pulled a funny face. He'd been way too down since the horse story. God, the horse story.

Moving on. Problems! So many problems.

And Selvig, who was becoming a problem. Fuck.

"Why? Asgard will take him back. Thor will take him back. We need him gone."

"Uh ..."

Tony exchanged glances with Bruce.
"That's not quiiiiite how it works. I mean, okay, yes, but -- there's a bit of ... oh, fuck it, sit down, you're gonna wanna sit down for this. You're Swedish or whatever, right?"

That got him a cold look. "Norwegian."

"Whatever. Okay, you ... grew up with the stuff Thor comes from, yeah?"

"I read them as a child, yes," impatient. "Stop stalling."

"Well, uh, remember anything about Loki? And a horse? And a horse baby?" Tony grimaced, anticipating his reaction.

Selvig blinked. "What?"

"I thought that too! But, turns out he was kind of, you know, a little kid at the time, and then other stuff happened, it's been a really busy few days, I so need a day off, but basically a lot of them are true and he's still a little kid and Thor is an evil torturing douchebag but doesn't think he is, but he's still a douchebag. As opposed to my kind of douchebag, extremely stylish and not so evil. So we're thinking that returning him to probably get raped by more horses isn't really the kind of encore that gets us ovations. Make sense now? See, aren't you glad I told you to sit down?"

He pinched his forehead. "He's got you hoodwinked somehow. This is absurd."

"I thought that too! But uh, no. Just go with it. We still have to stop the cube from turning us evil when we go. Also stop it from fucking up flight paths over New York, people are complaining. So if you do that, and I just kinda ... borrow your research a bit, tweak it, no problem!"

"Talking me to death isn't going to make me believe you. What's your evidence?"

"Do we have to do this again? Oh, God, we have to do this again. Your turn, Brucie. I'm going to go ... out. That way. Wait, I'll make earbuds, I'm staying, you can't afford to lose me. Don't go anywhere."

Tony plugged his ears, set it to triple-band Black Sabbath, Jarvis and the team comm, and was immediately much happier for it.

"What just happened?" Steve. He'd forgotten about Steve. Poor confused Steve.

"Oh, either we're recruiting Selvig or he's going straight to Fury to tell on us. Dunno which." Tony shrugged and muttered to Jarvis, who was so helpful and obliging and could he be any more perfect? Actually yes, he could, but never mind. Not the problem right now. Later.

Natasha sighed. "I'm with Agent Hill. She's transcribing Fury's notes from the council meeting he's got going right now, and it's not good. They're basically threatening to sink us if we don't keep the Tesseract."

"Wait, she's telling you? Or you're reading over her shoulder again?"

"Agent Hill would never share such confidential information with a field agent," Natasha said, and Tony could hear the smile. Implied, but definitely there.

It was good that she and Clint were friends. It was like tuning into horrible vampire movies and getting reruns of Cheers halfway through.

"But they suggested at one point that SHIELD experiment on Loki to see if his abilities can be
reproduced. Fury deflected it, but they obviously still think it's an option."

"Absolutely not," Steve said, flat and firm.

"Yeah, kinda with you there. How much trouble is he in for not making a decision yet?"

"They're pretty unhappy about the nuke thing. We're good for PR right now, but apparently he stopped one of the birds with a grenade launcher. You got the cargo of the other one."

Tony contemplated two nukes and paled. One had been bad enough. "I have to buy him a drink."

"Don't sound like it's a horrible fate or anything," Clint said dryly.

"No just -- look, can we keep him? We have to keep him. He's ours. Like Agent Coulson. His first name is Agent, by the way. The Phil thing is a total lie."

"Who else would put up with us?" Bruce said through the comm, and Tony looked up to see Selvig clutching a kidney dish, the post-gag picture still turning slowly on the tablet in front of him.

"Jesus, put that away. Done?"

"Yeah, think so." Bruce patted Selvig's shoulder, and Tony wrinkled his nose and switched over the bands so he could hear what he was doing again.

Selvig was pale when he wiped his mouth and sat back. "I don't know what I can do to help, but ... Thor exists." He spread his hands. "It's not so far-fetched to imagine that the rest is true to an extent. Just very improbable. And fantastic." He blinked again. "I'm not convinced, mind you. It's not actually all that accurate to the myths I know. But I'll say it is possible."

"Isn't that what we do? Improbable?" Bruce said, and there it was, there was a smile. Just a little one, but there, and Tony was more relieved than he had any right to be. He didn't know what to do with sad people.

"Besides, Thor. He's improbable. Look at the way he swings that hammer. You can't tell me that's probable."

"True enough," Selvig said, chuckling, then saddened. "We're friends. I didn't -- well, I didn't think about the other stories. I was so busy convincing Jane he was crazy."

"Yeah, well. Sometimes ... sometimes people do that. Sorry." Bruce patted him on the shoulder again, awkward now that Selvig wasn't puking and he had no real reason to be in doctor mode.

"You can keep spouting off about the Tesseract," Tony told him. "You're the only one who can do this, so if you chicken out now I'll drag you to a bar and kidnap you when you're really drunk and make you finish it. I'd even let you look at my repulsors afterwards if that helps! But, you know, no pressure."

Selvig gave Bruce a long look, and Tony realised what he'd said and made an oops face. "Is he real?"

"Unfortunately," Bruce said, and yup, that was a smile, and Tony almost almost didn't mind that they were making fun of him. Except that he did mind, and he made the obligatory protests when they stole Jarvis' attention.

"Are you sure you can kidnap Loki?" Steve was doubting him. What was with that?
"Am I sure I can? Yup. Am I sure I will? You betcha. Am I sure Fury will be conveniently out of the way? Absolutely."

"Tony --"

"Have I ever let you down? I mean, that one time, but there was the blue stick of destiny, that doesn't count. Have I since?"

Clint made a thoughtful noise. "You're pretty sure he'll step aside for us."

"Didn't you hear him? Wait, no, Bruce, you weren't there, I nabbed the audio when I suited up, anyway he said he wasn't arguing with Loki being taken back to Asgard. He didn't say we even though he'd just made a big deal about being director. And the I in we is yours truly."

"That's consistent with what he's saying now," Romanova said. "He's stalling them and they're upping the ante. Stark, if this doesn't work..."

"Fury and me, we got a thing. You just have to read the eye. It's all in the eye. He loves us really. It'll be fine. I am a genius. I am the genius. I privatised world peace. Have I mentioned I'm kind of a big deal?" he said to Selvig.

"He's not usually this bad," Bruce said, and hey, no, that was actually ... kind of true. Huh. "The thing with Loki's got us all, uh, rattled. A bit."

"I am not rattled. I am perfectly cool and suave."

"You're vibrating," Selvig said, and it was horribly gentle.

Tony looked down.

Well, fuck.

"Sit," Selvig said, and pushed a stool against his knees. "Breathe. You're panicking."

"Oh, am I?" Tony grinned. "That's funny. I could swear I was completely fine. I am completely fine, get off, you're worrying for no reason. I can't breathe," he added.

"Tony, do you need me to come in?" Steve sounded worried. He'd worried Steve. He was a shitbag.

"No, no, stay right there, start on the next set, blue and green right? I'm -- I'm completely and totally fine, I just have a little breathing problem. Ha ha. Thor almost killed me yesterday, did you know?"

"No," Selvig said, and kept saying useless things like breathe and counting and how many fingers am I holding up. He had nice hands. Big hands. Warm. Very still hands. Which was good. He felt a bit whirly. "Did he?"

"Uh-huh. But Clint was great, he totally saved the day."

"Stark," Romanova said. "Keep it together."

"Sorry, can't hear you! Breathing problem!"

"Tony," and Bruce was there, being calm and doctorly and concerned, and friendly, and he might even have new friends. That was great. That was really great.

And none of them had been raped by horses. Ha ha! Bow-chicka-neigh-neigh. Wow, that was
funny. It was really, really funny.

Tony laughed, unable to stop, and lost a bit of time somewhere in the middle. He came back to himself to find that he was making weird noises like a baby on Selvig's shoulder, and Selvig was rocking him, Jesus.

"I'm good," he said, and pulled away, intensely embarrassed. Then again, what were a few tears between dudes? All was manly here. Manly tears. "I'm okay, I'm okay, I'm good. All good."

Selvig levered him up and gave him a bottle of water, and Tony sniffed and wiped his face and settled into pretending he hadn't cracked over his own stupid fucking joke.

"Right. I'm good. Steve, how's the sheets?"

"Combining orange and blue with a third yellow lasted the longest. But purple, blue and red worked too. They lasted about two hundred and fifty punches each."

"So about the strength of where he was last time. Okay. Any issues afterwards? How'd they break?"

"Orange-blue-yellow shattered a bit."

"That's not good, we don't need that, let's see what we've got here. Jarvis, pull up the composition."

"Stark, are you --"

"I'm fine! Seriously! I'm fine. Moving on. We're past it. The time for talking about it is going, going, gone, look at that. No more feelings talk for fifty minutes."

"Tony," and that was Bruce, and he knew he still looked pale and shaky, but really, come on, give a guy a break.

"Nuh-uh! Fifty minutes, I mean it!" He snapped his fingers. "So, cube. Jarvis, simulate what we've got so far with the composition. I think that'll work, actually. Does that look like it might work to you?"

"Uh, sort of, I'd be concerned about the gamma interfering with the carbon fibre, but ..."

"Well, if we shield both sides, rather than run it through the wall itself, but set up a field, kind of --"

"That's going to be incredibly complicated to implement. You don't have time. Take a look at what you've got surrounding the Tesseract now. It held at a specific size, but if you could expand it --"

"Like a bubble? That could work. Maybe a square bubble."

"Yeah, but then we've got interference and I still need to land, and I want my spinning wheel, I have to have the wheel, so -- wait, whose turn is it to babysit him?"

"You call it babysitting?" Selvig said, aghast again. "That's like feeding yourself to a lion and calling it a hairdo!"

"Actually, lions are very lazy and don't often kill humans," Romanova said. "He's more like a hippopotamus. They're deceptively vicious."

"Seriously, Nat?"

Tony beamed. "That's it! That's perfect! Operation Help the Hungry Hippo!"
"Oh, my God, Stark."

"I ... I think I like it," Bruce said, grinning now. "I like it."

Romanova was sighing at him, he just knew it, but she sounded resigned if anything. "I just might regret that."

"Aha, but do you?"

"For you, Stark? Never."

"You say the sweetest things, Agent. Ever played Hungry Hungry Hippos, Steve? You should, we'll teach you. We'll get smashed and play it. I'll get a game. I'll make Pepper do it, hang on. Whose turn was it anyway?"

"Mine," Bruce said.

"Bruce's," Clint said. "Steve did it, then me, then Nat. You can't because you're indispensable. Sucks to be you."

He was still smiling a little as he pushed the screen over his workstation Selvig's way and picked up the tablet full of gamma readings they still hadn't had a chance to crossmatch. "I'll go feed the hippo."

"What'd I tell you? It never sucks to be me, Barton. I'm a genius," Tony announced, and revelled in the chorus of exasperated sighs.

Two problems down, one million to go.
The conference with Fury and Tony's CEO was one of the more awkward phone calls in Bruce's life to date, and he sunk into his chair and let them duke it out. It was SHIELD paying for the sixteen guards they used when they couldn't get an Avenger in front of the cell to take it down to eight, and he was comfortable with being petty when SHIELD was involved. Very comfortable.

"He hasn't got the stick of destiny," Tony said.

"He could go for it! Tony, honestly, sometimes I think you --"

"Oh, don't finish that, please, I'm having flashbacks --"

"You are not. Mr. Fury, what do you think?"

"I think," the deep voice very grim, "you're playing with fire. This isn't funny, Stark. It's not cute. It's damn risky. You are no compensation for Thor flattening my base. I have good people down there. I'd hate to lose more of them."

Ouch.

"I still have the Tesseract! I still have it. He can't go home without it! I bet he can't even touch it. It's all the way up in New York, and he's right here being fawned over by your biology kids. He wants to fuck with me? Bring it on."

"Tony." His CEO looked very weary. "He's a god."

"And I'm amazing," he countered. Bruce watched his hands get wilder and jerkier and sank even more in his chair. "He was a god like two thousand years ago! Not here and now. He's been gone so long he hasn't even realised that our gods are completely different now. He acts like we expect them to be shitty and superior and so fucking bloody, I mean, have you seen the whatever it's called, it's just really bloody poetry, they all fucking wade in blood, and it's like he expects us to forgive it because he's a fucking god and that's just what they do."

Fury just got grimmer and grimmer the more Tony said, and Bruce exchanged a look with the CEO. She waved a hand at him, urging him to take the floor, which, no, Tony had it just fine. Even if he was using it for, uh, not the best purpose.

"He's not New Testament, Popeye. He's Old Testament, and I have the fucking power here. Not you. Not your little tin soldiers. Deal with it." It was a good thing Cap wasn't here to watch this. He'd probably drag Tony off for soldierly breathing exercises. Crap. Bruce had to talk, didn't he?

"Um, I'm here." He waved and kicked Tony to get back down in his chair. Bruce was a little grateful when he did. The CEO mouthed thanks. "The, uh, Tesseract is ... in New York. Um, there's a few more departments for Thor to introduce himself to, and I'm sure we can, um, keep him busy with, uh, fawning. Um, he's very willing to answer questions. We're getting his answers recorded and, uh,
transcribed, and hopefully we'll have a better idea of, uh, what Asgard's like. But, um, I'm ... I'm pretty sure we can keep him out of the way long enough."

"Come on, Fury, they don't care," Tony said, coaxing next to him. "They just think he's the bees knees. They have no fucking reason to say anything about Loki. I mean, make an edict if you want, but last I checked they were asking him about plants on Asgard. I mean, plants. Loki, plants, kinda seeing a difference."

Fury sighed. "Sixteen guards, Stark."

"Oh, come on --"

"At least. Personally selected by Agent Barton. You will wear your suit. He gets a toe out of line, you will subdue him. Failing that, Doctor Banner, I expect you to step up and contain him."

"Uh ... sure."

"You can go, Doctor Banner." The eye swivelled to fix on Tony. "We got some details to hash out. What's this about Loki overcoming the restraints?"

"Ah." Tony smiled wide as a shark. "About that."

Bruce took that as his cue and slunk out, a little relieved to be going to the cell, and kept his tablet under his arm as he weaved around the guards. Lots of weapons. That was ... nice. Necessary.

There was already a chair, probably Natasha's. He sank into it and flipped off the SHIELD screensaver, watching the passive radiation from Loki hum across the screen. It helped to divide the workspace into thirds, one devoted to monitoring Loki and the other two taken up by type sequencing. It was tedious work. Soothing.

The counter on the top of the screen began to flash distressed warnings, and Bruce looked up -- and up, he was tall -- at Loki, dressed in the black armour and standing very close, no bandages or cuffs or blanket in sight.

Bruce glanced into the cell and found a Loki with all those things still lost in reading and studiously ignoring him.

"Wow. That's, uh, that's ... fascinating." Bruce cautiously swiped his stylus through his body. Looked so very real, but apparently the stylus disagreed. He was a little off to his nose, too. Not much, but the smell wasn't quite leather. Maybe a different tanning agent. "What is this?"

Loki smiled nastily. "An illusion."

"Huh. So is it just me? Anyone else see you?"

"No." He tipped his head, and Bruce realised he was intent on the tablet and from his eyes, reading it upside down. "It is not substitution."

He touched his comm, keeping his eyes on Loki. He left it off on his end more often than not, and kept the Avengers muted when there weren't the emergency pips. Bruce had a habit of talking to himself while he worked; not the way Tony talked to himself, as if to an audience of a thousand (always his own audience), but to himself. "Tony? You can keep your, uh, shareholders."

There was general squawking, most of it outraged, and Tony overrode it all, sounding ridiculously happy for hearing their enemy wasn't as contained as they'd thought. Sometimes he thought Tony to
be very, very strange. Stranger than usual. "I knew it! I told you so." Bruce sighed. "What's happening?"

"An illusion, apparently. It's ... very good. I mean, it could be holographic, except for, uh, physics as we know them. He says I'm the only one can see him and the guards aren't shooting anybody, so, uh, that's probably true. Actually they're kind of giving me, uh ... funny looks. Can you see him on camera?"

"Nope," Tony said, still way too happy. "This is great!"

Bruce blinked. "Oh, because of the --"

"Let me tell it, Brucie, don't spoil my fun."

"Oh, right. Because." He shrugged up at Loki. "Because."

Loki was obviously listening, looking pleased as much he was suspicious, and Bruce recognised, in a way, the delight of attention. He didn't understand it, he'd never been that person, but he saw it.

"Because. Loki, Loki, can you hear me?"

"Yeah," Bruce said, watching Loki smile.

"Can you show yourself to me through the audiovisuals? But just to me, not Bruce." Holy shit! I saw that, did you see that?" Bruce shook his head. It was though Loki hadn't been there at all. "No? No? You weren't kidding. Okay, let Bruce see you, let's not make him nervous."

Now Loki was just smug.

"That," Tony declared, "is perfect. You keep being perfect, Bruce, we need more perfect around here."

"Uh, sure," he said, and muted it again, seeing Loki's gaze sharpen. He didn't think letting Loki overhear the argument between Tony and Fury would lead anywhere good.

"You are studying my magic."

"Yes?" he hazarded.

Loki stepped back, chin lifting. It was strange to hear his voice again. His diction was ridiculously perfect. "Why?"

Bruce eyed him. "I'm a scientist. Uh, I research radiation. Gamma radiation. It's what the Tesseract emits, and you do too. I'm kind of an expert, so... I'm trying to figure it out."

"Your science is witless as a babe," Loki said casually. "Few among you have the intelligence to understand your superiors."

"That's great," Bruce said, and turned back to the tablet.

Loki was suddenly way, way too close, startling him and screeching bright and panting mad, smelling of blood and sour metal. This, Bruce could recognise. "Do not dismiss the rightful King of Asgard!"

Okay. Button. Big button.
"Sorry," he said. "I'm sorry. You study a lot too, right? Uh, this is stuff I have to do, and I get lost in it really fast, that happens to you too right?" Still watchful. "So if you want to talk to me, uh, just wave your hand around and I'll see you. Don't -- don't yell."

Sounded like an impressive story behind it, too. Bruce had bits and pieces from Selvig, who had bits and pieces from Thor, but Thor hadn't said much since he came back to fill in anything about what happened to make Loki try to level New Mexico with him in it.

How did Asgard know about the Chitauri anyway, if they were unknown to Asgard? Was it the gatekeeper that told them? (Since Selvig told them that Thor got his attention by saying his name, they'd immediately resolved to be careful not to say it. Or think it. Too many unknowns.) Why not before? Were the Chitauri hidden somewhere somehow? If they could hide like that, why did they need the Tesseract to come through to Earth? Was it a matter of hiding and travelling being different things? Or was the Tesseract just faster? Intergalactic express? Exactly where did Tony drop the nuke?

Was he going to drive himself crazy with questions he wasn't qualified to answer?

There was ... a thought there. He'd have to mention it to Tony, it was a Tony thought, but something nagged like it was important.

Bruce waited a little while, but Loki didn't say anything, and he shifted back to his work.

After a moment fingers clicked under his nose.

Of course. "Yes?"

"These isotopes. Tell me."

"Uhhh. It's a system of chemical classification --"

Loki made an impatient noise. "Why these?"

Bruce shrugged. "They made the most sense."

"Hmm."

He looked up after a few minutes. "I'll bite. 'Hmm' what?"

Loki was examining the top of his head, coolly disinterested under dangerously low lashes, and Bruce stifled the urge to back the chair away. "It's a pity. How long did it take you to believe he meant to hurt you?"

Bruce huffed a little. Being invulnerable as the other guy didn't make him reckless, but it let him say things he wouldn't otherwise. Then again, he'd always been full of excuses. Tony said he just liked trolling people; Tony wasn't often wrong. "You're either very good at guesswork or you're telepathic or something. But my relationship with the other guy isn't a secret, so..."

"Yes. The play of the man."

He holds up a finger. "I came first."

Loki was suddenly very close, bending so their cheeks almost grazed, and Bruce shifted away a little, Loki speaking in his ear. "Did you?"

Bruce kept himself very still for a long moment, just breathing and listening to the illusion parody it,
then shook his head and pulled away enough to see his angular smile.

"Ever hear the phrase 'you're too fucking close'?"

"I'm familiar." He straightened, hands suspiciously lax at his sides. "You hope to gain what, exactly, from this pretense?"

"Of?"

"You reek of fear. You hide it in whispers in the dark and the relief of the beast, and you always, always fail. The stench lingers, Dr. Banner."

Kid or not, he did a good job being creepy.

So Bruce did what he did best and deflected. "Maybe I ... feel responsible. I could just be bored."

Loki half-turned, chuckling. "What boredom for a simpleton?"

Bruce waved at the air between them. "Look, I'm not about this word stuff. I just want to get my work done."

"Yes. Your work." Loki paced closer. "I should be angry, I think, for what your heroes have done."

"You're not?"

"It requires the opportune moment." He snapped his fingers under Bruce's chin again, mischievous. "I'm fond of your accomplishments. The city of Harlem was excellent."

"That wasn't," and he shut up too, too late.

Loki made a moue of pity, his glance knowing. "Ohh."

Bruce shook his head, trying to clear it. "You wanted something. What was it?"

"Merely a curiosity."

"No, you -- what was it? Come on."

Loki shrugged. "Really, I was curious whether I could cast the illusion as of yet. My family did always underestimate me." He smiled. It wasn't nice. "Do you underestimate me, Dr Banner?"

He blinked. "I actually don't have a clue what to make of you. You're all over the place. Literally."

He frowned at the inside-the-cell-Loki, who wasn't even pretending to read now and was smirking at him. "Is that weird?"

"Perhaps it's wise," Loki corrected, and it was an offer, somehow.

"I'm not falling for it," Bruce said, rueful. "Sorry."

Loki waved carelessly. "No matter. You're not important."

Cheap shot. Either he really wasn't trying, he was too impulsive, or he was trying too hard, or all of the above.

Bruce took off his glasses and folded them, pinching his nose. "Sharpen up that tongue any more, you'll cut yourself. You know that?"
Loki reared back, laughing. "Oh, I have. More than you know." He spread long-fingered hands. "I am Loki Silvertongue."

"You're not doing a very good job of it, are you?"

He bent close, so near again, and at this distance his smile made him look a bit like a pixie. The evil kind. "Oh?"

Bruce waved his glasses between them, uncomfortable. Loki obviously had proximity issues if he was trying to intimidate the other guy. "Uh, that was a mistake. That wasn't an invitation to live up to the name, okay? It, uh, it really wasn't. This is fine. Really. So, uh, do you have range? Can I walk away and you'll ... fade at some point or something?"

Loki folded his hands in front of him, glancing at him from under his eyelashes. "I won't tell you."

"I kinda figured." Bruce sighed and tapped the tablet. "Care to tell me what this spike means?"

He leaned over, for all intents and purposes entirely distracted. Bruce didn't buy it.

"It's the readings from the jet. This is when Thor comes in. 1:23:65," he said to the tablet. Bar lines redrew themselves across the screen, layering in conflict, and there was an intense burst that cut sharply, knife-like even in a graph timed in milliseconds. "What happened?"

Loki tipped his head, mouth flat. "I was leaving."

"But Thor interrupted," Bruce said, and he tapped to freeze the spike in the middle of another loop. "This is when he grabbed you, isn't it? What did you do?"

He was smiling when Bruce met his eyes. It was worse, actually. He looked intrigued.

"Doctor Banner," slow and soft and menacing as he approached, edged like he was going to giggle, and Bruce looked at them again, at the overlap, the arc, and hastily interrupted. There was one other possibility.

"What did he do?"

"So close," Loki said, almost mournful.

Bruce held steady. "You sound like I'm missing something. What am I missing?"

"Everything," Loki breathed. "Did you hold affection for her, Doctor Banner, in your childish need? Was it everything you hoped to have? Was touching her a balm to your wretched inadequacy, or did it only worsen your lack as you lay awake, wondering why? Why could you not satisfy her? Why didn't she satisfy you?"

"I loved her," Bruce said firmly. "I tried."

"Oh, no," he said, rapaciously wicked, licking his teeth as he smiled. "No. You mistook it, as a beast rutting in the dirt mistakes his mindless lust," so hypnotically tender. "Never more than that."

Bruce shivered, tried to find something to say, and found nothing, and tried again. The third time, he licked dry lips and said: "That's some hypocrisy. How's that, uh, working out for you?"

Loki's eyes widened, impossibly black. "What -- ah. Yes. Your soldier told me of your mortal tales," silk, velvet, chiffon, strangling soft, and his grin was so savage. "As you embrace yours, I imagine," stepping back, but not at all backing away. It wasn't in the same universe as a retreat, it only gave
him more space to intimidate. "Of course your massacres are not your responsibility. Eight thousand in all, was it, Doctor Banner? Do you know?"

The tablet was whining, metal biting into his knuckles. He unclenched carefully, stroking the side in apology. "What are you even trying to do?"

He shrugged. "You have been so accommodating. I assumed you were my entertainment."

Bruce glanced at the tablet itself and choked.

His data was ruined. Utterly, utterly ruined, and his heart sank as he thumbed through file after file from the plane, corrupted beyond repair. He could only hope Loki hadn't touched the backups, hadn't somehow reached into the servers and ruined everything there too. Everything else was fine, was intact, it was just that six seconds.

"How did you --"

The illusion was gone, and Loki laughed at him from his cage.

Bruce turned the tablet face down and concentrated, very fiercely, on relaxing enough to ease his headache. Either Loki reached into the servers, or he reached into Bruce, and he wasn't sure which possibility he hated more.

There had been a thought earlier. A very important thought.

He was going to work with it. That would -- accomplish something.

Played. Completely.

Bruce just wasn't cut out for this freakshow, and he touched his comm. "Um, Tony?"

Loki laughed harder.
Chapter 12

Steve could admit that he was the only Avenger right now that would handle Thor without flying off the handle himself, but that didn't mean he liked it.

He didn't understand Thor at all, and watching him now as he hurled the hammer at prototypes of three magic barriers hastily marked out with sheets, he wasn't sure if he didn't, either. Not entirely, but -- perhaps a little.

He wanted to understand how someone so genuinely, gruffly kind could be so unfamiliar with the concept of asylum that Steve mentioning it for Loki meant nothing to him.

Understanding meant history. His history, the parts of it he didn't like remembering, that darkened the world until he thought he would never get up again. History that until not so long ago was yesterday, not yesteryear.

Steve led the liberation of over thirty HYDRA encampments, boltholes, document centers and experiment houses in the years between receiving the serum and falling. Getting in was easy. Getting out was much, much harder. There were people, usually, and they were half the problem.

Some were clerks, led away with sullen mouths and blazing belief, and some were supervisors who clutched handkerchiefs to their mouths and cried relief; some were slaves, bolted to floors and walls, skittering under tables at their approach and curling away from their shoes. He remembered having to take his boots off so many times on missions that he'd started peeling them off at the door, like he was entering someone's house, and picking them up on the way out to avoid the glass on the streets.

In the experiment centers there were other people. Ten of them they'd stormed, of an estimated twenty spread across Europe. Two were already abandoned by the time a team reached them; three were no more than a heap of materials waiting for work.

Five they liberated were in full use, from the morgues to the maternity wards to the cells to the dining rooms, and the gag Thor placed on his brother would not have been out of place. It would have perhaps even been a little tame among the things he'd seen.

Steve once spent three solid hours kneeling in front of a hung cage a girl grew into, the bones of her shins rippled from pressing against the bars, coaxing her through the door he'd opened. There was no lock, no latch; it had simply been closed, and there she had lain, waste dripping into a drain beneath her, and refused to move even when they cut gangrene from her flank where the bars melded into skin.

One of the soldiers passing on final rounds shot her in the head as she reached out for the chocolate Steve was holding for her. The soldier was tired and overworked, at the end of a siege that had lasted more than two days, and even with the serum Steve felt the exhaustion, the paranoia of lightbulbs that exploded acid and floors that dropped into pits of stinking corpse drippings. But he remembered the shock of how white and fresh the inside of her skull had been compared to her skin and the mat
of her hair. Clean and smooth. Remembered turning on that soldier, angry, so angry with everything, and seeing the quivering gun brought to bear on him by someone so fresh out of recruiting his shoes hadn't been broken in.

Three years -- only three? it felt both shorter and longer, perhaps it was longer -- of hunting HYDRA warped him. The Commandos knew that, felt the same, had twisted themselves just a little inside to fit in a world that said none of it, none of it was okay, but killing people who looked just like them was just fine as long as they were on the other side. That if they killed enough of them, they won. No matter the whispers of what was done with the prisoners they handed over to the people who were meant to care for them.

Selling war bonds and punching fake Hitlers never prepared him for cruelty. Apathy and boredom and strange rashes in borrowed clothes, but not the cruelty of fighting bullies again and again, only to find more that couldn't be trusted to stop if he gave up, could only be stopped by death or imprisonment, and death was faster.

The thing was, it let Steve fail to make animal analogies. The others could joke about lions and hippos all they wanted, but Steve -- Steve didn't have to. He thought of the girl, and the boy, and the other girl, and the men, and the women, and the ones so carved up no-one could tell and they didn't have the tongues to say, and thought of how different all the prisoners had been in knowing they were there by the fate of being convenient.

Not wanted, or hated, really, by the experimenters. Most of the experimental assistants he met were -- curious, and willing, and didn't care about purity or blood as long as they had a supply of living flesh to work with. Being hated helped, when you were imprisoned. Being wanted for something intangible helped to resist. But being convenient, because someone wanted something and you were just there, interchangeable, seemed to him to be one of the differences between the ones that came out of the cages when they were opened and the ones that shied away from the doors.

It seemed an awful lot like Loki was convenient to the Chitauri.

He'd been thinking it over, the sceptre and how interconnected the army had been that a single enormous blow from Tony had dropped every one, and he couldn't find another answer why Loki, of all people, would have been used as a tool to spread control. It didn't make sense for Loki from the myths, for the Loki they'd met in the helicarrier's cell, fearless and capricious and so different from the fevered gold-horned madman that ordered him to kneel.

"Friend, you are troubled."

Ah. Thor. All three barriers were smashed, but by the chatter it was a good result, or at least something they could improve on.

Steve looked up from sitting on an overturned crate and squinted up at Thor, marvelling at the way the wind moved his hair and the sun haloed his shoulders, sparking off the armour on his hands and deepening the cape's colour to blindingly bright.

It was a pulp fiction cover, and very real for it, too real to draw without making it unreal all over again.

"A bit. Pull up a crate?"

Thor sat gingerly, and though it creaked, it held. "I fear I have been the cause of great division without meaning to. I did not know we were so different as peoples."
"Me either," Steve said, wondering how to handle it, how to talk to him. He was so bright, and the inside of Steve's head was painted in blood and the memory of prisoner tallies, days scratched out with rocks and fingernails.

He'd always had a tendency to melancholia.

"Thor, do you ... do you know why we reacted like that? Do you want to know why?"

He shrugged a shoulder, squinting into the light. It was a dry, sunny day, soil kicked up into their faces by an intermittent breeze. It didn't suit him; the desolation made the solidness of him, his sureness, stand out like a sore thumb. "I would know if you were willing to tell. Your people are grieved by pains beyond count. Far too many. I have caused one somehow. Beyond that, I don't know. I thought to have friendship here," he said suddenly. "But in acting as a friend I have lost one. Your Romanova does not like me."

"She has -- I think she has her reasons. I can explain a little if you'd like, but I think we don't know enough about Asgard yet to explain properly." Steve glanced at him. "What's it like on Asgard? War, I mean."

Thor laughed. "It does not come to Asgard. It did not but for Loki's schemes, and briefly at that. We keep peace among the realms and battle where we must. I have been many realms, Steve. Some are very beautiful, and have peoples so fierce we battle night and day. They are worthy opponents. Others ..." He sighed now and took a handful of dirt from by their feet, rubbing it through his fingers. "Some realms are not beautiful at all, but ruined by surrender. What remains of them fight, but their spirit is as dust and they are easily slain." He opened his hand, closed it. "They give their land as kindling, and complain when it is burnt."

Steve tried to pick his way through one objection at a time. He wasn't sure he'd actually talked to Thor before. Properly talked. "Is Asgard the only peaceful planet? Uh, realm?"

"Yes and no. They are not people as you and I know it. With minds more or less, but people? No, there are monsters, many, among the realms. Many will speak. They war among themselves for their own ends as you do, and bend their necks to Asgard when needed. All is peaceful until threatened, as I threatened it not long ago. I began a war with Jotunheim through my foolishness, and while I cannot finish it with the Bifrost destroyed, I would not ever continue it."

Thor was desperately lonely, Steve realised, and willing to talk because of it. He almost felt bad about it, but with HYDRA fresh in his head he couldn't afford to.

"It's different here. It's ..." He trailed off, trying to think how to explain. How to even start.

Thor was nodding. "It is difficult. Allow me your patience. I did not gag Loki for cruelty. I would never do so. It is what is done to silence a magician. Their words are powerful, and they trick with them when they must. It is not safe to allow them speech."

"Needs must," Steve said, and thought of Erskine. Never stop being a good man, he'd said.

Had he stopped? He didn't think so. Had Erskine said that now, Steve doubted he could have matched the idea of a good man that everyone except Fury seemed to assume. It was very different now. Wrongs were wronger, and rights were ... murkier, and no-one was quite good. Principled, resourceful, clever -- so clever! -- but goodness seemed to be one of those abandoned things, like telephones with cords and handling photographs carefully.

"Yes, exactly." Thor sounded relieved. "You understand."
Steve shook his head. "I don't think I do, Thor. I understand necessity. I think we disagree on what counts. I don't think that doing painful things is necessary just because someone talks a bit too much. Do you get that?"

Thor was frowning again. "You misunderstand. It is not a matter of a loose tongue, but a silver tongue. He will hurt you. That is my fear."

"Does he have a reason? The Chitauri are gone, the sceptre's gone, the Tesseract's going to be shielded with that stuff pretty soon. I can see playing tricks. Tricks go too far sometimes. But seriously hurting us would be ... we'd have to do something to deserve it. I don't think we have yet."

"You speak as if he needs a reason," he said grimly.

Steve looked away, chasing the sky for even a little bit of cloud and finding none. "We don't know him, Thor. He doesn't know us. I mean, does ... has he hurt people he hasn't meant to hurt, before now?"

"Not always," as though it were dragged out of him. "He was kinder once."

Pick, pick, pick. Careful. It wasn't an interrogation, but it wasn't just a conversation, either, and Thor was so willing to talk. "Did things change after Slepnir?"

Thor sighed gustily. "A great many things did, my brother least among them. The All-Father's steed, with my father's spear, has firmed our place in the cosmos. We have had great peace, and great quiet. Too much quiet, I think. I grew restless. Perhaps we acted upon other realms for our amusement when we should not. And I have offended you yet again."

"Ah -- no -- I -- well. Yes. A little. It's different. May I explain?"

He made a grand gesture. "Please. If it will help."

"We don't really have one great power here, now. There's major nations, and some coalitions I would never have expected, but conflict is something that we deal with all the time. Especially recently, even if not at home. But the thing is, the people we fight, a lot of the time we fight them because if we don't, they will come and fight us. Can the other realms do that to you? Get into Asgard and kill your people as easily as you can kill them?"

Thor shook his head. "Not without a master of magics or the Bifrost. It is why it incensed me so, to have Jotun in our treasury among the relics of our people. It was ... an unprecedented challenge. I lost my temper, and brought war to Jotunheim. I was banished for my foolishness. Then Jotunheim paid the price for my brother's madness in my absence. This was two of your years ago, perhaps one. Much has happened. It did not take very long for my life to become -- very different."

"Still dealing with it, huh?" That was something he could sympathise with. "I was asleep for seventy years, so ... not the same thing, but -- it's hard to keep up. A lot of changes."

"Yes," and Thor hunched in on himself a little, unsure in a way Steve had never seen. "I have as well, but not so much that I am accustomed to fighting my brother. I wish for him at my side. I miss him, very much, and I do not know what is wrong. I simply do not know what to do. I do what is right, and it is wrong. You do what is wrong and call it right. It is vexing."

"We're having a lot of trouble with Loki's history. Understanding it," Steve said, and it was so much easier to say, sitting in the shade with water in his hands, with the empty space around them and SHIELD looming two miles to their left. "It's -- it's not the sort of thing that happens a lot here." Half a lie. The details didn't.
Thor shook his head. "The All-Father is a good father," he said firmly. "Loki is intractable. He has tried for him, Steve. How he has tried. And yet."

He inched in a little, metaphorically speaking. "Perhaps he blames him."

"How could that be?" he exclaimed. "It is not my father's fault Loki speaks when no wise man should, and claims things not of his making, and seeks things which no man should know. Loki has ever been Loki, and he has not listened to wisdom nor cared to obey. He would prefer to imagine resentments and lick wounds into his mind and blame them all upon us than hear us fairly. No, Steve, if he blames my father, it is not right. It is not at all right. I am sorry. I am not so well with this as I thought."

"No-one is. I mean, it's not easy for anybody, dealing with this. I don't think anyone has good answers. But you can help. You can talk to me, and maybe we can figure something out."

Thor looked relieved. "Yes. Speak."

"So, Thor, when you say that he's done things wrong, do you mean that ... do you mean that he is wrong and you've tried to fix him, or do you mean he's done wrong things?"

"Yes. No. I do not know." Thor slumped back against a support pillar; it shuddered. The line of his mouth was moody. "He is adopted. A Jotun. They are a race of monsters, the same he tried to destroy. Yet he is my brother, and we grew together. I would not slay him, I would not harm him, if he would but act as he should. He was a prince of Asgard. He was capable of strength like mine, and could fight as a warrior. But he did not. He chose not. And now he turns from me, and remains a prisoner, and still does nothing to prove his worth. He is impossible."

Steve felt very acutely for Loki, who'd never had a serum to transform him from wits to muscle, and probably never wanted it. But Thor wanted it for him, still shook with how much he wanted a brother like himself. It was like he thought there was a key, and if he forged it right and turned it just right, he would unlock a Loki that fought like he did and behaved like he did and never stepped out of Thor's expectations and everything would be better again.

Not even the serum changed Steve that much. What changed Steve was the war, the dead and dying and tormented, and knowing that he would die for it just as surely the soldiers behind him and getting on with it regardless.

But he hadn't died in the war, only gone to sleep and woken up to them all being dead without him, and he remembered being tiny and sick, probably the kind of kid that wouldn't have lasted a month in Asgard before being politely put outside to die. He still felt like that kid a lot of the time. Especially around Tony and Bruce and all of the Avengers really, who seemed like they were born to what they were, or deserved it especially, or were so good at what they did that it was part of them and they didn't have to try.

Steve still hadn't found the trick to making it look that easy. He didn't even know what it was. He just got up and tried and hoped.

But he was still different because of the war, and he hazarded a strong guess that Loki was different because of what happened to him, too.

"You're very different people," Steve said eventually.

"But I knew him. I knew him well. This creature that stares with these eyes -- looks at me with this hate -- that is not my brother. I do not know who he is. I must keep him safe, so that my brother can
be healed, and return to himself. It is not the first time this has occurred. He has always been defiant. Sometimes his defiance ran too strong, and he chose unwisely again. There was a giantess, wicked and ugly, and Loki had -- I do not know what they had exactly. But they had monsters for children, and she was so very cruel to my brother. Yet he told us he would stay, and flee from us if we took him." Thor sighed. "He was not in his right mind."

"Did he love her?" Steve said, stunned a little speechless. They'd done it to him before.

"Bah." Thor waved it away. "He forgot her easily enough once she was slain. The children we took, and bound as the monsters they were, and he was none the worse for it. Better, in fact. He thanked me for his rescue, and for a long while I had a true brother." He smiled wistfully. "It was a very good time."

Steve fought back bile. Forgot? Thor thought Loki forgot when he drew them like that?

Was that the first time anyone had ever even asked him about them?

Was that the first time anyone had told him it was all right to love them?

"Children aren't so easy to forget, Thor," he said, trying not to be so harsh that he angered him, trying not to show harshness at all, but some would slip through no matter what. "Perhaps -- perhaps he took it seriously."

"We did no harm," Thor said, and slumped further. "They were dangerous, and we were even merciful. We should have killed them, and our father stayed his hand instead. It was a great concession. And yet I still offend. Do you find my people so distasteful?"

"I think you're the favourite," Steve said quietly. "And I think it's easy to notice that sort of thing if you're not."

"Well, yes. But it was not my fault. I tried as well. We all did."

"Thor, can we --" He paused. "Is this difficult?"

"Very," Thor said, weary. "I prefer not to think of these things. It is a family affair, and that you ask -- it is with great respect for you that I speak of these things. That does not ease it."

"Shall we stop for a while then? It looks like they've had time to change them a bit."

People were filing toward them, carrying more of the barrier prototypes, circles and metal and things he didn't quite understand the shape of, like puzzles with only one end.

"Yes." Thor clapped a hand on his shoulder as he got up and passed him, hammer swinging idly from his other hand. "You are a good friend, Steve."

"Yes," Steve said, and smiled through bile, watching the flutter of his cape and the brightness of his armour as he went, tall and strong and godly and skewed to the core. "I am."

But not a good man.
I love Clint. In fact I love them all.

So much to do, so little time, so much annoying to bull through.

Nat wasn't even protesting, which was a sure sign of how grim her mood was. They were on the clock, and it was running faster than anyone else knew.

SHIELD cared about surveillance (unsecured webcams) and spies (Natasha) and recently nuclear deterrents (Stark, Avengers). Its governing council did not care about fairness (Cap), or prisoners (Loki), or humanity (or lack thereof, see: Banner, Clint), or loss of life (nuking a civilian population).

That SHIELD cared about those things were Fury's influence. It was only through careful selection of excellent agents and select recruit training that he managed to maintain a record that wasn't too bloody, and even then he supervised almost everything to maintain his position as the ultimate fallback, and even then Clint carried out at least six orders for 'enhanced interrogation' on captives past their usefulness in the last decade, filmed so the council could review the tapes and decide Fury was being 'tough' enough.

The moment -- the very moment -- someone decided to be a hero and jumped over Fury to go straight to the council, they were all fucked over.

So Clint silenced three of the four guards that stood attention during Loki's shower scene and left awake and alive the one that had held Loki's head still and been careful not to hurt him, and let the guard know in no uncertain terms that that was why he wasn't joining the others in pretending to be Sleeping Beauty. The guard had been surprised that Clint noticed. Not surprised like hiding it, but surprised because it was instinctive.

There was decency there. SHIELD wouldn't cultivate it, but it could give the impression of appreciating it. So Clint recommended him for diplomacy -- Coulson had trainees, but they were nowhere near his fluency -- and called it done.

The voices of the Avengers were less distracting than most, Stark being the loudest and longest while Nat and Doctor Selvig bit in every so often with commentary.

However, Bruce let them know in no uncertain terms that they had a problem with the hippo, and Clint was about to swing down and start shooting when he explained that Loki had managed to fuck up his data. A very specific slice of it. From inside his cell six metres away. With an illusion that only Bruce could see.

The data wasn't fucked up for anyone else, apparently. Just Bruce. And just for Bruce everywhere on Stark's server copies at SHIELD. Banner could use the exact same computer and access the exact same files, and it would show Wingdings for him but not for any random passing scientist corralled into cooperating with Banner's muttering.

"What did you do?" Clint said, tracking the movement of an escaping scientist beneath his walkway
and marvelling a little at how stupid they were. Fleeing from the Hulk was hardly going to help Bruce's temper. "You said something. What did you do?"

"I don't know," Bruce said, sounding tired. "I asked him about when Thor took him out of the jet that time and he started digging at me. My head's a bit scrambled."

So that was what fear felt like on top of the hate. Oh, good. "Banner --"

"Not like that! Sorry. God, sorry. Not like that. Just normal-scrambled. I think it was his version of a, uh, Hannibal lecture. You know? The -- I hated that movie. But uh, like that."

"Oh, you mean like Rorschach?" Tony said.

"Who?"

"He's the guy in the comic that says 'I'm not locked in here with you. You're locked in here with me.' I love that line. And then he kicks everybody's asses."

Clint considered that a moment. "That's fucking creepy, Stark."

"Yeah, uh, that's ... what he said."

"That miiiight've been a bit inappropriate. Anyway, Capsicle! How's it going?"

Steve sounded even worse than Banner when he answered. "Okay. One of the new ones is giving Thor some trouble."

"Excellent. Green, right?"

"Yeah."

"SELVIG I TOLD YOU SO HEY SELVIG I TOLD YOU!"

"Tony, stop screaming into the comms, we can hear you."

"Sometimes I just have to express my righteousness. VERY LOUDLY. You know. For verisimilitude."

"That's a big word, Stark."

Clint thumbed off his mike and tuned them out. He tracked down Fury in Coulson's office, slouched with a tumbler of whisky in front of him and staring into it like it could tell him everything he needed.

"Barton," he said, and if Steve and Banner sounded tired, Fury sounded like he could sleep for the world for decades, voice gone to gravel and blinking slowly. "Report."

"Incapacitation successful, sir."

"That's something."

Clint stepped in, careful, and doublechecked the door before coming to stand at the desk, letting himself be a bit familiar. Fury was his first handler when he was an incredibly fucked up teenager with a penchant for taking the most difficult kills, and he liked the man even if he almost never agreed with him. Learning to disagree -- that he could, that there were ways to do it that didn't have to escalate and end up with arrows in people -- that had been a hell of a gift. He was still grateful.
"What's up, boss?"

Burnout was a very real concern for SHIELD agents and handlers, and it only got worse the further up the chain they went. Fury as director had to juggle more balls than Clint was allowed to know existed, and he had to answer to a council that thought nothing of assassinating him and replacing him if he didn't perform to their standards. Fury deliberately made himself irreplaceable, had to be to stay alive, but twenty years of field service and fifteen directing the failboat on top of a career that let most people retire with bullets or hefty villas in the Mediterranean was taking its toll.

"Everyone's getting on my tits. Sit. Tell me something, Barton."

Clint wasn't sure the others realised who Fury was in the scheme of things, exactly. Probably they didn't have the access, or didn't care enough to read the right files when they did. Nat, a little, but but she hadn't served as long and she'd been more distanced from SHIELD's core projects.

If anyone understood, it was Stark -- he had a lot of the same function when it came to Stark Industries, and secrets to keep that Nat was able to discover but not actually find out in the time she spent shadowing him, and it wore on him too.

But it was Stark knowing, so Stark didn't bother to try, and Clint actually didn't care that much about him.

"Steve Rogers is depressed," Clint said, sitting down and sniffing the glass, checking for poisons and sliding it back. Good whisky. Coulson always liked the good stuff. "Should probably test for PTSD."

Fury rubbed his chin. "Man goes through a lot of punching bags at odd hours."

"Insomnia or serum?"

"Serum. PTSD ain't helping. Agent Barton, what would you do? What would be your concern in this situation?"

He knew this exercise, and he took the time to think about it. Hill might supervise in Fury's absence, but it took the two of them -- one commanding and stationary, one mobile and enforcing -- to even begin to match Fury's coverage. "How do we make Loki want to stay put?"

Fury flicked his fingers. It wasn't encouragement, but it said Clint was at least on a good track. "Go on."

"He's already slipped the magic cuffs enough to freak out Doctor Banner. Nothing physical that we know of yet, but he's obviously recovering from something. The nerd trio can sciencegasm barriers around the Tesseract and for Stark Tower all they want, but if Loki doesn't want to stay put he won't. If he does want to stay put and we can convince Thor on his behalf, Thor can speak to Asgard. Odin's not benevolent, but I doubt he'd move against Thor openly so soon after he was banished. He still needs an heir the people will respect, and if we offer the Tesseract in exchange he can't afford to look stupid with Thor so close to getting the crown. This would be a good way of doing all those things."

Fury eyed him.

"What?" Clint raised an eyebrow in mock-offense. "Hey, I pay attention."

"Clearly. How do you propose we do that?"
He shrugged. "Hell if I know, sir. It's sticky. I don't think anybody knows what Loki wants other than his kids. If we had time to find them, we could do something with that. But he's likely to pay as much attention to our farts as our promises. There is one thing, though, sir. One of them is supposed to be here on Earth."

Fury's brow creased. "Deep-sea sonar hasn't picked up anything for Jorgumandur. If he's inherited the shapeshifting, he could be anybody."

"Well, the banishing was that he was too big for Asgard, right? Where do we know that's unexplored and big? And there's something else." Clint pulled Coulson's tablet toward him and tapped up an audio file. "Listen to this. NOAA picked it up in 1997 in the South Pacific not too far from the Chile Fracture Zone. Called it the Bloop. Unexplained low-frequency noise, maybe from an animal, but not one anyone's heard before. Or since."

"You think it's him?"

"Dunno what else it could be, sir."

Fury pulled it over and tapped up orders to start examining from there, then closed out and pushed it back. "Anything else, Agent Barton?"

"You look like microwaved shit, Sir."

"Yeah." He breathed deep, let it out, and Clint saw how stressed he was and wondered for a moment if he should actually be worried. "Got any suggestions?"

"Bag of weed? Sleep?"

Fury barked a laugh, drained the glass, and got up. "Sure hope you ain't telling me things I shouldn't be hearing, Barton."

"I can't imagine what you could be hearing, boss."

"Keep it that way."

Clint stared at the empty chair, throat tight. "I miss him."

Fury nodded. "Don't we all. Competence is sorely lacking around here. Go on. Go be competent. Make me proud." He touched his comm, tipping his head to listen, jaw sagging a moment before it clenched. "I'm gonna need something to smile about."

Summarily dismissed, Clint swung by the cell just in case and found Banner scribbling in a notebook and scowling ferociously, Loki curled asleep and tucked so tightly under the blankets only his hair and a few fingers were visible. The guards signalled him that they hadn't seen much themselves, but they were suspicious of Banner's mental state. Considering most were Foreign Legion, suspicion from them meant different things than it did from SHIELD's own infantry. He skipped a stone across the floor to get Banner's attention.

"How did he do it?"

Clint calculated risks and hit the soundproofing switch, watching barriers slide up the plate glass, and dropped down beside Banner. "Fuck you up? He does that."

"I meant more the data, but yeah. Thanks for, uh, making noise getting here." He gestured vaguely. "Sorry, I'd ... invite you to sit down, but uh."
"Just checking up on the prisoner."

"And me," but it didn't sound annoyed. Grateful, actually. "That's ... that's nice. I could use a little, uh, checking up. But, right, you're busy."

Clint settled himself into a crouch on the other side of the walkway, bow ready. "Doc, we're on a team. I'm not that busy."

A brief smile. "Right. Okay. Do you think -- sorry, this is insensitive, I -- it's just a thought."

"God, he fucked you up. Look," holding his hands out, palm down. "I'm here, all right? Like, you can see me, I'm not lurking up there or whatever. I'm down here 'cause of you, yeah. That's why you're not bothering me. And I'm fucking hard to offend. So just ask. I don't wanna answer, I won't. So ask. If I get pissed off, you'll know. Okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I -- I got the message. Do you think he was brainwashed too?"

"Probably," Clint said, hands easy between his knees, looking up at him. It felt like there was no difference at all in their height anyway, the way Banner curled so small on himself. "It's not like I stopped being an ass when I got mojoed. It changes what you care about right then. Doesn't change you so much. If you fight it, and yeah, I fought it a little bit at first, it can -- it fucks with your head. If you fight it. If you don't, no problem."

"And Loki's stubborn."

"And Loki's a god," Clint said. "Of chaos. And so fucked up sideways that getting mojoed looks like Sunday dinner. Not anybody's ideal candidate." He was getting curious looks. Clint hated curious looks. "What?"

Banner shrugged, waving the pen a little. "It's, uh, you ... you sound pretty sympathetic. Really sympathetic given everything."

He groaned. "It wasn't my first rodeo either, Doc."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Yeah, no, I hate him. Let's be clear about that. I'd happily piss on his grave every day for the rest of my life. But so happens he's alive, there's politics, and I have to suck it up and deal. I have a beef. Beef," one hand, "job," the other, "works out like this." Job hand went high, beef went low. "Priorities. End story."

Banner was giving him another look, way more complicated. "You are a better person than you think."

"Nah, I'm competent. You're not an agent, Banner. How it works is, the moment I get orders to take the shot, I'll take it. Won't lose any sleep. I just don't have them yet."

"You think --"

"Might need to." Clint glanced at Loki; still burrowed, and the guard supervisor signaled him that she thought he was asleep too. Not Legion, but solid and loyal to Fury. Hadn't hesitated to shoot him on the Helicarrier, even if he'd dodged. They needed that if Loki decided to worm his way into the Avengers' good graces. "Be better, wouldn't it?"

Banner was laughing a little, shaking his head in a way he got used to seeing in the circus. It was the
"how-are-you-real face. "You're terrifying."

"Competent," Clint said, and cracked a grin. "Welcome to SHIELD. Sure you're okay?"

"I'm -- I do feel a bit better actually."

"Cool. Mind me hanging out?"

Banner looked ridiculously surprised. "Uh, no. No. That'd be good. Thanks. Why?"

"I'm not a mighty intellectual like you," deliberately misunderstanding, "but --"

"No, no, I didn't mean it like that -- don't --" He saw Clint cough into his hand and sighed. "Oh. Teasing. Right." He shifted from the hips up, the habit of someone used to uncomfortable chairs. "Though, uh, you're not stupid. I -- really. Everybody's a bit stupid with Tony."

"Dunno, I think he likes it that way. Got a lot in common with sleeping beauty there."

Banner tipped his head at him, and yeah, there was the doctor, sharp and shy. He didn't see things the way Clint did, didn't have the training, but give him enough time and a distraction and he had good logic. Clint was good at being distracting. "How much do you remember? You said there was crossover. Or -- no -- not remembering. It didn't work like that," half-guessing, but he happened to be right. He'd clearly been talking to Selvig.

"Not remembering. Remembering's somewhere over there. It's knowing, right here," gesturing to his head. "I know a lot. Mostly that I hate him. You read the SHIELD dossiers they gave you on us?"

Banner twitched. "Uh, no, I didn't want to see mine. Circus, was it?"

Clint sat back on his heels. "Yeah. I know something about putting on a show. It's sound and fury and card tricks, Doc. The kid's a powerful mess and you got close to something, so he barked. When we were controlled we didn't get too close and he didn't bark so he came across pretty pleasant. Basically he's a total control freak."

"That sounds ... odd, actually. But right. I wouldn't have thought, but ..."

They both stared at Loki, snoozing under a fluffy green blanket and for all the world oblivious.

"Can tell you one thing. Those Chitauri are nasty sonsabitches. Whoever Thor thinks he's dealing with, it's not there."

"More torture?"

"God. Mojo stick. Would you give it up without a guarantee he'd do as he's told?"

Banner managed to look almost relaxed. "I wouldn't have it to give. I mean, nobody would give it to me. The other guy would break it."

Clint had a thought. "Why didn't you?"

"Uh, I only had it for like two seconds --"

"No, exactly, you had it. Why didn't you Hulk?"

Banner was frowning. It was a pretty epic frown. Could go on a philosopher head. "The Chitauri are stupid."
Clint followed easily. Distraction, time, logic. Proof of concept right here. "They think you have to poke to piss people off. Right in the heart. They go for the obvious. They didn't land with a plan, they just ramapaged."

"But Loki's not. I mean, whatever he was doing, it was a complete fuckup, but it's -- there were good parts. Like there were two people planning. Loki, and ... does the sceptre have a mind?"

"Not that I noticed. So what controls a god? The cube stuck on Stark's eyesore right now?"

"The sceptre and the cube are connected. I think they might've been almost the same thing, or Selvig's failsafe wouldn't have worked. I mean, before the other guy came out, that was the data. We found the Tesseract with it."

"But then I got the command to attack. At pretty much that moment from the logs. It's not just tracking things through mojo, it's actively hostile."

"We knew that. I mean, flight paths over New York -- oh. The spear's connected to the Tesseract, and the Tesseract's ... active. It's not a door exactly, it's a phone." Banner was turning an interesting shade of grey. "Oh. Do you think it knows?"

Clint thumbed his comm. "Doesn't matter. It can't stay there. Guys? You've gotta move the cube."

"Working on it," Stark said.

"No, I mean, you've gotta move it. It wants to be free and it's up pretty fucking high right now."

"FUCK." There was a flurry of chatter, and Clint looked back to see Banner groaning into his hands.

"Hang in there, doc."

Banner gave a ghastly smile. "I think I figured out what Loki didn't want me to see. On the jet, with Steve and Tony, there was a spike when Thor came in. I was trying to -- anyway, it wasn't -- it wasn't either of them. It didn't match. It was the Tesseract. Loki wasn't leaving the jet, he was going -- the readings are from the middle. It was the other direction. To the controls."

"You think it's afraid of Thor? Or it could've been protecting Loki."

"From Thor?" Banner shook his head. "That hammer's good, but, you know, cosmic cube. I think it was protecting its own interests. Whatever's talking through it didn't want to be found out. It was ... Loki's plan to get the Hulk. The Chitauri was whatever's at the other end."

"That matches," Tony said. "Thor said something about somebody controlling Loki after he pulled him out."

"It's not conscious," Selvig broke in. "It's sentient, but it doesn't have a mind."

"Then who got it open for Loki to land here? Doc's right, the Chitauri are idiots." Clint got to his feet. "What if it didn't close? The portal, yeah, but a mind-link or something."

"Doesn't matter. We have to get it off the planet," Tony said. "And off my fucking tower."

"Guys." Nat sounded worried. "The council just called Fury again. They want the Tesseract."

He thumbed off the soundproofing on Loki's cell. "How much time? Sorry, doc."

"No, no, I'll -- I'll wait for Steve."
"Yeah, be nice if you were in the lab."

Rogers sounded like he was jogging. "On my way."

"Hill says he can drag out a day but they'll shut him down."

"So like five hours? Seriously, Bruce, get down here."

Clint nudged Banner with the toe of his boot. "Cap won't take long. I'll watch him."

"You sure?" Banner was already getting up, though, and the relief of getting to escape was written all over him.

"Yeah." He watched Loki stir and unhooked his bow, taking position, nocked and half-drawn. "Go."

Clint didn't have orders. Yet.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Thanks again for the kudos and comments - you're all amazing. :) Thank you so much for reading!

One of the scientists -- they were almost interchangeable to him in their white coats and soft voices, a sort of uniformity that still surprised him in comparison to Howard -- stopped him on his way back with a tentative "Captain Rogers?" a computer on her knees that was more of a plain screen like Fury's.

He'd already taken too long, delayed by Thor's attempts to keep him close, but he turned back to her all the same and wasn't surprised or particularly hurt when she shrank back; she was as little as he'd been before the serum, and she had the wide-eyed soft look of someone not quite sure what they were doing in a military facility. He knew the feeling. Presumably her disability didn't help. "Yes?"

"I'm Doctor Rodrigeuz. Director Fury ordered me to -- I'm a geophysicist -- to work with Doctor Banner to find Jorgumandur. Loki's son. I think we might've. Um, if you could ... ask ... him?" She pushed the computer at him, whatever courage she'd got up to talk to him clearly deflating. "There's a -- um, here, there's a camera of the area, it can be controlled like this, and there's hydroacoustics on this key here to see the general outline. You can't see very much, but you can hear a little. Mostly just a heartbeat. Whatever it is, it matches the description of something massive, um, it's -- it's very long, and I think it's asleep. I hope -- well, if you could ask if he recognises it, I'd really appreciate it."

Loki's son.

Steve cradled the sheet carefully. "I will. Thank you, that's -- that's amazing."

She smiled, pushing back coarse black hair, visibly relieved to have that particular request over and done with. "It was fun. I narrowed it to three locations, but the final examinations were much easier with Doctor Banner's expertise. And Mr Stark's satellites, of course. I'm not sure anyone's thought to look specifically for those gamma spectrums before, but it worked out quite well evidently. Sorry to keep you."

"No, no, that's ... this is great, I mean it."

"Well, thank you." She gave a quick smile and rolled away, swallowed by her oversized white jacket.

Steve continued to Loki's cell, marvelling a little. People could do that now? Find things in the sea based on a picture? It was so precise. He'd heard enough ranting back in the day about the imprecision of the instruments Howard had to work with.

It wasn't very surprising to see Agent Barton standing guard as though he was going to put an arrow into Loki's eye and Loki insolently presenting his back as he paced.

"Hey," Steve said, eyeing both of them. A bad time, obviously, but Steve didn't exactly have a choice in the matter. "How are things?"
"This guy is pissing me off," Barton said, giving Loki the stink-eye. "Same old."

"Well, I've something to ask him, so if you'd mind lowering that?"

"Sure, Cap. I wouldn't shoot you."

Steve thought he wouldn't, but Loki was canny and he had no idea how he would take this. Slipping into the cell was fairly easy, and Loki watched him with narrow eyes.

"Hi. I don't know if you heard me talk to Agent Barton, but I'd like to ask you about something. Your son, actually. Jorgumandur. Is that okay? I have news."

Loki jerked back, eyes wide, hands coming up in front of him like was going to cast something if Steve said the wrong thing. He probably would. "What?"

"We think we found him."

Loki moved, and Steve clutched at the chains looped around his neck, gasping as Loki pulled him back, fighting not to drop the computer as guns clicked and bristled around them and Loki panted into his ear. "Stand down, Barton, stand down, all of you. Loki --"

"Touch my son and I will kill you, I will kill all of you, I will tear out your veins and smother your children, I will raze every bit of your precious city to bare rock and have you weep upon your lack for the rest of your worthless mortal life --"

"Wait, I'm not going to take him, stand down, Barton, wait -- wait -- I'm not going to take him away. I'm not going to hurt him."

Steve sagged to his knees, letting the sheet fall and tugging at his wrists; for someone trembling so badly, Loki was strong, fuelled by a rage that was burning cold and desperate against him. "You say that," low, "you all say that."

Steve fumbled for his hand, pressing it to his head, eyes swimming as the chains tightened and Loki's fingernails razed his scalp. There was still a chance, if he could just find the words. There was a chance to salvage all this. Truthkeeper. He could start there.

"You know when people lie, right? You can -- listen. Listen. Listen. I don't want to hurt him. I won't hurt him." He thought it with all the sureness he had, the instinctive recoil of it, thought it in huge white letters as he said it in case that would help, in case Loki could see inside with his hands on him like this. He didn't know he could, but he didn't know he couldn't either. "I won't hurt him. No-one's taking him away. I won't hurt him."

Loki was quivering, breath fast and unsteady, and Steve clumsily patted the back of his hand, sagging as he fought to breathe. A fight between one desperately protective god versus one exhausted super-soldier didn't favour him.

"I won't."

The chains relaxed a little, enough for Steve to catch his hand again and turn to grip his elbow, Loki's fingernails shifting to dig into his elbow above arteries, brusingly sharp. He was horribly pale, feral and eyes darting, and not listening at all. "I will kill you, I will kill you," he whispered. "I will find everyone you hold dear and slaughter them before your very eyes, I will rip their corpses apart and feed you their hearts."

Steve took desperate gasping wheezes and fumbled for the screen, brushing a finger over it in search
of something to draw Loki's attention from slowly strangling him, and accidentally filled the room with a noise that managed to cover his own gasp of relief as the chains slackened.

It was nothing he'd heard before, loud and deep and very, very slow. The beating heart of a creature bigger than Steve had ever seen or heard of.  

Loki whimpered, fixing his eyes on it with a horrible twisting sort of disbelief that Steve recognised. He recognised it, and he knew this particular fear. He'd dealt with this enough times. "Stand down, Barton," he said again, and nodded to the outline on the screen, still struggling to breathe past the chains but no longer choking. "Is that him?"

His mouth crumpled, and he stared at it a while longer, then flung the chains off Steve and sent him tumbling with a kick, only to sink in front of the screen like he was afraid to touch it, hand hovering until he turned down the audio to something much less of a resounding thud.

Steve came to an easy stop, careful to stay kneeling. Overshadowing him right now would just spook him. "I'm sorry I broke it to you like that. I could've handled it better."

Loki made an odd noise, touching shaking fingertips to the screen, stroking it absently. "No. No, this -- no."

He was crying.

"What will you do?" very soft, indistinct through the bloody gauze, and Steve hated the hopeless look of him, how he gazed at the sketchy outline like it was the only chance he'd ever have.

"With him? Leave him alone, for sure. It's not like he's hurting anybody by sleeping. I just thought -- well, we weren't sure if that was your son. I thought maybe you would recognise the heartbeat, if anyone."

"I do," and Loki drew himself up into kneeling, the screen balanced on his thighs, tears slowly sliding onto the surface and brushed away by the way he was ceaselessly petting it. Blood trickled down either side of his chin in a gross parody of Tony's goatee. "It has been a very long time. He's ... he's grown. He's mine."

"Yes, he is," Steve said, as gentle as he could in the face of his anguish.

"He's mine," softer, and Loki said nothing more after that, not even when Steve knelt beside him to change the bandages, careful not to get his arm between Loki and the screen.

Then Loki visibly steeled himself and held it out by a corner, eyes flat. The way he'd suddenly stopped caring, like he was done and had his fill, would've been casual and believable but for the unshed tears.

Loki would prefer to give it up than have it taken away.

But if Steve had anything to say about it -- and he wasn't afraid to throw his weight around on this issue -- no-one would, and that was that.

"No," Steve said.

"Take it," awful and grinding.

"No. It's yours. He's yours. There isn't anything on there but that. It can't connect to anything except that feed. It's all your son. It's -- it's yours. Keep it. You're right." Steve curled his fingers around a
corner of it, watching him warily as a snake about to strike, and pushed it back towards him. "He's your son."

"Does it please you to see me this way?" he spat, looking like he was caught between smashing it and crying again.

"I'm sad for you. I don't -- it's not pity. I'm just sad. Please don't hurt yourself again, I just got finished changing the bandages."

Loki stumbled to his feet, stepping away with a sneer, the screen with its soft, slow heartbeat almost abandoned. Almost. Steve was pretty sure that if he even looked like he might take it Loki would tear his throat out with his teeth, gauze or not. It was so obvious he was trying to convince himself not to care, and it was equally obvious he'd done it so often that it barely worked anymore.


Steve took the cue to take his own distance, leaning against one of the walls. Barton was holding stance with the bow still drawn. "It's okay to miss them."

Another of those terrible sounds. So old. "You know nothing."

He nodded, accepting that. There was a lot he didn't know; there always was. Confusion was the natural state of Steve Rogers these days.

"You're right. Just -- you know, it's there." He got up, careful not to show his back to him, Loki wavering toward anger again and measuring the chain in his hands, and politely withdrew.

Agent Barton was as like to shoot him as Loki, apparently. "What the hell, Cap?"

"I made a decision on behalf of the team," Steve said. "And ... look at him."

Barton stared into the cell, then made one of the most exasperated faces he'd ever seen. It put Bucky's to shame. "If Fury gets an aneurysm over this it's your fault."

"You sound like Tony."

"I'm seeing why," he grumbled, and released the tension on his bow. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Do you mean more stupid?"

"Anything else stupid." Barton shook his head. "Hope giving up our ace in the hole was worth it."

Steve met his eyes, and inclined his head to Loki, who was approaching the screen again, stalking it like it was a predator and he was its hungry prey. He looked terrified. But there was an eagerness there that said he'd done the right thing. "I think it was."

"Cap, Cap, Cap. What are we gonna do with you? You're too good for this business," Barton glanced around. "The guards will change over soon. Keep your comm on."

Steve settled into the chair someone thought to provide and produced a sketchbook from his jacket. "It's SHIELD's fault I'm here, so I think you might just have to put up with it."

"Oh, Cap." Barton made another face and left via a jump from the railing into the ceiling, disappearing into a shadow and then nothing but a soft hiss that could just as well be a pipe.

Steve drew what he imagined Jorgumandur to look like, scaly and serpentine and peaceful, maybe even happy, and out of the corner of his eye Loki took the screen to the mattress and cried himself to
sleep atop it, volume so low Steve could barely hear the sound of two children long lost.
Getting the first functional bi-directional magic-shielding prototypes set up under tents near where Thor and Rogers had tested the original sheeting and defenses was as easy as asking Agent Hill if she really wanted any of Stark's large-scale demonstrations under the same roof as her head. Other than that, testing was a go.

Twenty minutes and there were pavilions set up and an army of enthusiastic gofers carrying equipment back and forth down a track that was more dirt than gravel, directed by Stark who waved his arms and flashed his sunglasses and made an obnoxious spectacle of himself, demanding fans, blenders, ice and sundries like fruit and wooden bar stools.

Fortunately for all of them SHIELD was used to his ridiculous requisition demands, and it was all produced without much fuss.

Natasha watched it all from Phil's office, sorting through what hard copy he'd left behind under her access key, and when she found what she wanted she memorised the codes, put them back, and made her way to Loki's cell, deliberately unhurried and purposeful.

On the way she took an earbud, two four-liter bottles of water, a squeeze bag of sunscreen, and a wide silk scarf, dropping down beside Rogers where he was biting his knuckle and watching Loki contort himself in weird positions in a nightmare she wasn't inclined to interrupt yet.

"Oh. Agent Romanova, hi." He gave her the usual smile, subdued and perfectly polite, but overall his attitude was of someone edging toward dangerously emotional.

That sort of instability wasn't something they could afford in Captain America, and she resigned herself to still more maintenance and nodded to the likely source of his agitation. They still had some time until Stark was ready. "How is he?"

"Um ... not well. Better, I think? But not well."

She offered him one of the bottles of water. "You?"

He considered her, obviously thinking what to say, before his shoulders fell to something resembling ease. It was strange how he decided to open up to her and then did as though the decision was all it took.

"It's hard," he said, taking it and popping open the lid. "Everything says we won. It was the war of my generation, the Great War, the war to end all wars. That, well. That didn't happen."

Natasha picked up one of the threads he wasn't saying, probably the one written in the way he tugged uncomfortably at his ear. "You don't think it was worth it?"

"Oh, no. It was. I believed -- I believe -- I was doing the right thing. It was right. Do you trust Fury?"
"I respect him," she said, and tugged again. "I don't have the patience to do what he does."

"Everything is wrong, Agent Romanova," and she settled to listen, satisfied she'd pricked in the right place.

Better he said this to her than the rest of the Avengers. Stark would blow it off with uncomfortable half-lies and buy gifts like it made up for anything, Clint wouldn't bother with lying or with the gifts, Banner would be too personally affected, and Thor would take it all to be about him.

"I fought so this wouldn't have to happen anymore. But Fury is as ambiguous as Loki, and I respect him too, but our principles are so different. My commanders in the war weren't pleasant, but they never lied about how difficult it was. They wouldn't have made a replica of a time that never existed for me and told me my gut was wrong."

Rogers smiled a little. It was very bitter, coming from a man who seemed overall to be kind-hearted. She weighed it against Clint's report of extensive psychological damage and found it likely.

"Rooms like that were for rich people. For their sons. On the ground we were lucky if we had stretchers. Forget about being the only one in a room, or being clean. I've never been the only one in a room. Is that how it is now? Lying to us for our own good and pretending it's not lying? At least with the war bonds everyone knew the propaganda was something that didn't really exist. It did help, but it was theatre, everyone knew it was theatre."

Natasha chose her words carefully, recognising her cue and willing to take it. "I grew up as the Black Widow." She tipped her head to Loki's cell, and the way his arms were curled either side of the screen under his head, clinging as though pinning it under his body would protect anything. At least he could still do that. "I don't entirely believe him, but I don't have to. I was pregnant when I was nine and spontaneously aborted on a mission. That part of it was never out of the realm of possibility."

Rogers was nodding, and she could see it hurt him to hear but also that he wasn't surprised. It was a sort of comfort that he didn't protest impossibility, or where was anyone, or what happened. He believed her too. On the one hand he was ridiculously trusting, absolutely ridiculous and it was a terrible liability, but on the other hand -- yes, it was a comfort. "I'm sorry."

She shrugged and meant it. "I didn't care. They never said I had to, so I didn't."

"But they didn't say you couldn't," Rogers said. "If it mattered. It didn't to you, but -- if it did, you could care."

He understood the importance of that. It was refreshing, and she got a little more of how people could like him.

"Right." Natasha folded her arms. "SHIELD was my second chance. There were conditions. There'll be conditions for him too."

Rogers leaned against the railing, taking deep swallows. "So they're going to lie to him no matter what. Is that -- this is a trick question, isn't it? SHIELD will. We don't have to. I don't have to."

"I'm not planning on it," Natasha said.

He squinted at her. "Really? You're very good. If anyone could..."

"That's why not." She shook her head. "I tricked him once. Doing it the same way twice is suicide."
"Ah. Tactics. I used to like tactics. It was easier back then. But I guess you're sort of ... subtly saying it was easier for me, right? Not for people like you."

"There's always people like me, Cap."

"Even back then. Yeah. Yeah, I met a few." He rolled the bottle between his hands. "Sorry. I was being ignorant."

"That's half the point of a shadow agent," she said, shifting the mood a little, enough to show camaraderie. "No-one knows what you're up to. It can be fun."

Rogers chuckled. "Like hitching a ride on an alien hovercraft?"

"Yeah. Pretty much. Thanks for the lift, by the way."

He laughed. "No problem. You're really something."

She was.

"Stark," touching her comm. "Tell me you're ready."

"I'm ready," he said back, clattering in the background and Banner's nervous giggle. "In about five minutes. Gonna talk to the hippo? Please tell me you've talked to the hippo."

She picked up what she'd brought with her. "We will. I'm keeping you on to explain. Don't call him a hippo to his face. Come on, Cap."

"You think this will work?"

"It's a Stark plan," she said. "If it works, it works. If it doesn't we're dead regardless."

"That is completely unfair!"

"Lithium dioxide," she said sweetly, just to hear him curse.

"Uh --"

"It happened before you came out of the ice, Cap. I'll tell you later."

She knocked on the cell and nodded to the head guard of the sixteen guards filing in to station themselves on the walkway bounding it. They were Clint's personal picks, loyal to each other and to him, chosen for slow trigger fingers and intelligence. She nodded back, rangy and sharp-eyed, and deliberately kept still as Loki stirred, blinked, and gave the screen under his head a look of disbelief.

"Hi, Loki," Rogers said, stepping into the cell, and Natasha wasn't sure if to be exasperated or sympathetic when Loki sprang from the mattress and crouched fiercely in front of the screen.

"We're not here to take it," she said, not missing the way he eyed her up and down with predictable contempt.

"No. Actually, Agent, can you get it onto the ear radio you've got there?"

Ear radio. "It's already linked up." She handed it to Rogers, who held it out to Loki. "Wear that, set the volume on the screen, and you'll hear him all day."

"Where do you plan to take me?"
"Outside. Little bit that way. We'd really like your help testing a few things."

"Mostly a magic barrier," Tony said through her comm. "So you don't throw me out any more windows."

"I didn't need magic for that," Loki said, warily rising to his feet.

"Some warning would've been nice."

Loki considered all of them, then snatched the earbud from Rogers' hand, examined it, and put it in, blinking when he discovered they weren't lying. The screen itself was kicked under the mattress, and Loki folded his arms and stared at both of them.

"Okaaaaaay, so, how this works is, can you make it so that it looks like you're there to the cameras and anybody watching you even if you're all the way over here? And, and, can you do it while making the real you invisible from there to here? It's about a mile."

"Yes."

"That is fucking awesome. Let me just say that. This is coming from me, by the way, you should be grateful. Anyway, do it. Pretend to sleep or something."

"Why should I?"

"Windows, hello! Also we're kinda planning to keep you, so, you know, magic barrier. Good times. But we can't exactly keep anybody away from you if they can just punch through everything with your freaky Asgard punch-fu."

"Tony," Rogers sighed.

"What? It's true. Did I mention the window?"

"Loki, I understand that you have no reason to blindly trust us. That's not what I'm asking. What I'm asking is that you help us."

"See those four soldiers? They'll watch the screen for you."

Loki gave them suspicious looks; the head guard met his eyes and nodded.

Surprisingly, Loki flinched, and he opened the bottle she handed him and tugged at the edge of the bandages, draining it while the plastic crackled in his grip. His face was hideous while it healed, but no worse than she'd seen before. "A demonstration."

"Yeah, exactly. Wiggle your fingers or something. I just wanna prove my genius right, okay? Come on, aren't you tired of being stuck in there? Come out for a while, sit around. We've got fans and smoothies and everything. Chill out a bit, do some tricks, mock me a lot. Don't you wanna come mock me?"

Loki scoffed, but took a step forward. Natasha wasn't sure he knew if he was doing it, or how he was smoothing back the bandages like they actually helped. "That's pathetically simple."

Only Stark could actually make 'come insult me' work as an enticement.

"You run cold," Rogers said. "I'm guessing it doesn't get all that hot in Asgard? It's baking out there. Put this on. It's sunscreen. It protects you."
Rogers ended up doing it for Loki, slathering his face and arms and throat while he stood passively and sneered.

Natasha stepped forward while he was doing his arms and wrapped the scarf around his head, tugging and tucking so it covered his face and shaded his eyes. The empty sunscreen got tucked into Rogers' belt. He'd had to use a lot to stop it from sliding off Loki's skin instead of sinking into it.

"We're ready," Stark said. "Illusion time, set, go!"

Loki rolled his eyes and shifted, or separated, or something in between, and there was a Loki, no sunscreen or scarf, coiled under the blanket and apparently sleeping.

"I'd say something that sounded like a compliment but I've hit my quota for the day. Forward march!"

"Tony," Rogers said, and gave the guards a nod, then nudged Loki forward. "You're not military. Don't even try."

"I watch movies."

"I don't think that counts," she said, taking her seat, empty bottles tucked under the chair like she'd drunk them herself. "Loki. Don't make us regret this."

He glanced at her as he passed. "Don't you?"

"Not yet," she said. "I think you can cooperate perfectly well. How about you try living up it?"

Loki looked startled. "You say that as if I could."

His protest looked and sounded completely unintentional, and she shrugged, unwilling to dig at it right this moment. Maybe in another direction, and she met his eyes, making it a challenge. An invitation. "Can't you?"

"Come on, you guys. What's taking so long? Stop duelling, it's not nice, Agent, you're mean. You're a mean Agent."

Natasha shook her head and lowered the volume on her comm, uninterested in Stark's complaints as Rogers led Loki along, murmuring reassurances under his breath until Loki twitched and hissed something that made Rogers smile and apologise.

Then Loki glanced over his shoulder at her, smirked, and the bottles rolled out from under her chair, caps popping off and dripping on her boots.

And he called her childish.
Steve strolling in and looking extremely uncomfortable and like he just TPed someone's house with a seemingly empty gap beside him made Tony wish for a handheld camera. He was terrible at espionage that didn't involve lying around for hours, absolutely terrible. It was priceless, really.

"Everybody not brilliant out," he announced, flapping at the last two labrats. "That means you and you and nobody else. Go go. Out. Secret experiments. I claim this land in the name of Tony Stark."

"It's not very secret," one of them muttered.

Tony whistled and pointed to the flap serving as a door. "What, do I need to throw a ball for you to go away?"

That got them storming out all huffy, and Tony doublechecked that the fans were running and all the flaps down and tied before he pointed at Steve. "Abracadabra. Show yourself!"

Loki was there, in a way he wasn't just a little bit before, and Bruce's counters screeched briefly before settling into a steady hum. He looked incredibly thin, kind of pissed off, and extremeeemely skeptical. That was unfair.

He made a face. Yeah, yeah, the suit was ridiculous. He knew. "It's a temporary setup," Tony said, and waved at a stool. "Sit, I'm still calibrating. Have a smoothie. D'you like smoothies? Somebody get the guy a smoothie. Can you eat like that? Mango and strawberry is great. Way better than chlorophyll."

Loki managed to perch on a bar stool and peel the scarf off his hair and look dignified the entire time. It was sickening.

If he'd expected anyone to end up giving Loki anything -- Tony loved his blender, it loved him too, it ought to, he'd made it -- it'd have been Bruce or Steve, not Selvig. But Selvig made it and brought it, and even put in a straw, and Loki looked like he had absolutely no idea what to do with him. Or it. Or anything.

Tony tried not to rubberneck too much, but everybody made it way too easy.

Seriously, the kid was way too much like him at fourteen. Except the only thing he'd tried to destroy was Howard's entire 23,000-acre testing field. Or, that was the biggest thing. The rest wasn't worth mentioning. It was only one house. Being packed off to MIT was a crappy punishment anyway.

Also he hadn't had any kids. Birth control implants did that to a guy.

And there was the destroying Manhattan thing. Not that Tony hadn't ever seriously considered it, but still.

Also the god thing. So not alike at all really.

"And we're up and running," Tony swept his hands apart. "Like it?"

Loki was sucking on his straw and studying the containment chamber with a critical look Tony recognised from MIT. "Where is your stability?"

Tony made a face. "Its or mine?"
"Iridium in short supply these days?"

"I can't imagine whose fault that might possibly be. Oh, wait."

Loki smirked. "How petty. There are so many other things to hold against me."

"Oh, like being thrown out of a window?"

"As I said."

Tony scowled. "You know what you have to fear right now? No more smoothie. Complete smoothie ban. Do magic or something. We've got a layer up, so put something inside. Come on. Prove to me how stupid I am. I bet you can't resist. You can't, can you?"

Loki rolled his eyes and flicked a finger, and a wisp of purple coiled into alarmingly-real-looking black snakes inside the containment chamber.

"Hold on, let's get readings -- got them, Bruce?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Try to get them out."

The motion Loki made would be best described as a tug, like on a pooping dog's leash, and the snakes coiled inside the containment but didn't move or disappear.

"Try harder," Tony said, and didn't really appreciate the glare he got, the emphatic turn of a skinny wrist. Cuffs. Right. "Okay, but like -- can you?"

"If you'd rather I destroyed my illusion."

"Yeah, that's kinda critical. Never mind." Tony switched off the containment. "Grab 'em." Steve gave him a hard look. "No, seriously, grab them while they're hot, Cap's making faces."

Loki looked over his shoulder at Steve, smiling because he was diabolical, and another flick of his fingers and they were gone.

"I'll pull up the other one," Selvig said, and they watched the barrier form. It was a bit queasy and pointless-looking, like the marble sheet-waterfalls in every hotel Tony had ever stayed in. "Ready."

"Okay, try now."

Loki flicked his fingers aaaaaand... nothing. "You should know this is but a fraction of my power." He sounded annoyed.

"Can't improve on something if we don't have it," Tony said. "That's great, that's great. Any weak spots in the coverage?"

They watched Loki flick his fingers over and over, a tiny wisp of purple beginning to coalesce inside before disappearing. "Top left, second rivet."

"Oh, the wave differentials must cancel at the curvature," Selvig said, and they started nerding while Steve looked incredibly interested and uncomfortable and excused himself to be radioed back when they needed him, and Loki drank more smoothie, watching all of them like they were a really bad movie and he was sipping coke instead.
Tony knew that look, the way he faded overlooked into the background; it was weird on a guy with so much presence usually, but he'd worn it himself, a lot, in the shadow of Howard and Obie's limelights and Tony was the last person anybody would accuse of not having presence. He'd made it that way.

Selvig and Bruce were playing off each other enough now that Tony could divert a bit of attention, maybe draw him out a little. There was a brain somewhere in there, it was just bugging him enough to get to it.

"How much of this do you understand?" Tony asked him, swilling down his own smoothie. If he could call that much White Russian a smoothie, he was going to call it a fucking smoothie. "The science, I mean."

Loki glared. "Your terms are uninspired."

"So probably most of it," Tony said, and slurped. It was funny to watch Loki's grossed-out face. "Think this'd work on your dad?"

"He would not come for me, if that is what you ask."

Okaaaaay, daddy issues. Tony got that. "Who would? Your kids?"

Loki was quiet for a while. "They cannot. No-one. Perhaps my mother if circumstances willed."

Tony thought it over. "So they want the Tesseract back, but not necessarily you, right? The you part is mostly Thor?"

"He means to redeem me."

Tony laughed. "I don't think that's gonna happen."

There was a sudden chill. His glass cracked.

"Hey, no, no, I mean -- fuck, listen, listen, I mean, if you will let me explain my douchebaggery, that the way they do it isn't going to redeem anybody. Ever heard of recidivism? You're guaranteed to fail whatever the fuck they want from you. Even if it's turning up to dinner on time."

"You know nothing," but it wasn't that heated. The kid just -- aw, hell, he looked like was gonna cry. Tony hated crying people. "Do not dare pretend you do."

"Do I look like I'm pretending anything?" Tony glanced around. "Well, other than being less massively cool than I really am, but the world couldn't handle the impact if I got down with my badass self." There was a smile sneaking in there, and Tony shook his knee, took the empty glass. "Tell you what, I'll make us more smoothies and you're going to talk to me. What's happening when you put your snakes in there? I wanna pick your brain."

"Your science is very different from magic," Loki said. "You operate on assumptions and call them fact."

"Yeah? What's your basis?"

"Possibility."

Tony considered that, shoving chunks of mango into the blender. "Huh. So you're literally the god of chaos, and chaos lets you do your thing? You're like a perpetual motion machine." He saw the
interrogative tilt of his head and elaborated. "Steers itself. Give it a poke and it just ... goes and goes and goes and annoys everybody. You want strawberries in this? Fuck it, we're having strawberries. So, possibilities."

"Yes." Loki was studying his hands, working his thumbnails under each of his fingernails to clean them. It was kind of a gross habit, but maybe that was how they did it in Asgard. "Every circumstance has its outcomes. Which outcomes are possible narrows as the time approaches. In the end there are few choices."

Tony leaned on the blender, feeling it whirr obligingly, and gave it a pat just because. "So, okay, because what I'm doing here ..." He tipped his head, thinking. "Okay, so -- by that logic, I'm not creating a forcefield that repels everything of a kind of thing for sure, I'm rejecting a range of possibilities?"

Loki was staring at him, fingers flexing. He looked like Tony pissed on his dog, or gave him a trophy or something. It didn't look like he was going to get up and kill him or anything, but Tony had no idea what else he was doing.

"What?" he said defensively. "I like knowing things." Hadn't anybody asked this stuff before?

"So I see," Loki murmured, and straightened. "You are not entirely wrong."

"Oh, so just a little bit?"

"Mostly wrong."

"Shit. Really? I'm twelve percent right though, right? It's -- it's a joke, my girlfriend -- anyway. Fifteen percent?"

Loki inclined his head. "The argument can be made."

"Good, 'cause I'm making it." Tony sat down next to him, passing around smoothies. "You're easy to talk to when you're not trying to kill me. Seriously, you had to throw me out of the window?"

He shrugged and bent over the straw.

Tony groaned. "I liked that window."

"You're never going to let that go, are you?" Bruce said, and Tony saw him and Selvig staring at Tony. At the two of them actually, and hey, yeah, it probably looked kind of weird. Hi, supervillain who tried to kill me, let's have smoothies and talk science.

It wasn't like Tony was logical or rational or anything, they should know better by now.

"Nope. Never. Not forgiving you. 'kay, try again. Need me to hold the smoothie? I'll hold it, there you go. Don't hand it -- put it there. Right. Limited-time offer, make it quick."

This time no wisps appeared, and Loki seemed almost satisfied. He was totally getting into it. Ha.

"Try both," Tony said, and nudged Loki with his elbow. "Let's see if we fixed the fucking resonance. And a one, two -- three --"

Loki snapped his fingers and nothing happened.

"Seriously?" Tony beamed, starting victory arms. "Woo-"
He snapped them again and a snake appeared inside.

Tony sagged. "Fuck you. You did that on purpose. Asshole."

Loki looked smug. "You have not accounted for all possibilities."

Tony sighed. "Bruuuuuuce!" His name was easier to whine than Selvig's. Not that he'd tried, but the ending g just made him sound like a clogged drain. Totally unattractive. "Any chance you'll help with this?"

That got him politely incredulous eyebrows. The 'polite' part was the tipoff. "Am I not?"

"Come on, you've got smoothies. I made you smoothies. Smoothies from the personal hands of Tony Stark. Do you know how often that happens? Not often. Give me a break."

"It's adequate," Loki said, like it was a great concession and Tony should be oh-so-grateful. He was about to wind up into a proper rant when Loki went on. "Do you know star skies?"

"Stellar wind? Radiation? Sun flares?"

Selvig looked interested. "The interstellar medium and the heliosphere do carry radiation of their own. Sometimes they alter the gravity of what they carry if they're dense enough. If the medium is ionised and they clash ..."

He and Bruce exchanged looks, then dived for the computers.

Tony gave Loki a nod. "Thanks, big fella."

"You would have been better off asking Thor. He knows your terms."

"Yeah, but you're the expert." Tony nudged him again. "Besides. All those biceps get on my nerves. They're as big as my head. I almost feel inadequate." He frowned at him over his sunglasses. "That cannot be allowed to happen."

He saw Loki chuckle, showing a network of lines around his eyes that hadn't been there before. No wonder they'd thought he was all grown up. Easy mistake. Tons of adults had midlife crises and threw temper tantrums in their shiny red sports cars. Finding out you're adopted? Hell of a midlife crisis. Worth at least a Jaguar.

"Loki, if you would try again, please." Selvig was surprisingly civil, really, but he was probably too boring to hold grudges.

This time the impression was much fainter, the snakes barely appearing, and the mist hung trapped.

At least it'd stopped exploding on them.

"That's a lot better. Jarvis, switch it. Ninety-three on the outer. Go for it, snake boy."

Now nothing happened; nothing went in, but the mist was still there, even when Loki frowned and tugged the air with his hands.

"Okaaayy. Drop. Did that up anything? I'm seeing ozone." The mist disappeared, and he heard Loki sigh beside him and glanced over to see that he was actually sweating a little. "You okay?"

"Bearing the illusion is of some strain."
Tony eyed him. "Huh. Okay. Guess you really don't have much to work with. Just sit, then. Drink up. Come on, guys, work with me here, I can't be brilliant all the time. No, that's a total lie, I'm just trying to make you feel better. What the fuck am I doing that for? Jarvis!"

It took them four more tries, six more smoothies (he really liked kiwi apparently) and Loki almost toppling off his stool before Loki couldn't get in or out, not even when he got up and tried to punch the magic through it. Apparently it helped, but all that happened was his fist went through and nothing else.

Loki almost fell over Selvig getting away, clutching his hand like he'd been scalded. "The sensation is most odd," he said, rubbing the skin, as waxy-looking now as the rest of him.

"But it's just going through it? Not being inside it?"

"I do not know."

"Want to check?"

"I am maintaining an illusion, if you recall," Loki said, leaning against a table and actually closing his eyes properly for probably the first time in two hours.

Tony groaned. "Right, I keep forgetting. Okay. Think that'll hold the Tesseract long enough for Thor to cart it?"

"Perhaps bind a much weaker variation to its container," Loki said. "He will need the Tesseract itself to go home. He will not go without me."

"You sure about that?"

He jerked against the table, and Tony realised he'd said exactly the wrong thing. Again. Foot, mouth, hello, tasty Louboutins.

"I'm an asshole, jesus, you know that, right?" He pointed to himself. "Asshole! Going to let me explain again?"

Loki waved a hand wearily, eyes still closed. "Be my guest."

"You're missing the point. Question is, do you want to go home?"

That got him a weird little laugh. "There is nowhere else that would take me."

"We would," Bruce said. Good old Bruce.

That got them another of those laughs, and they were seriously starting to creep Tony out. "Oh, no. You would not."

"Then do you want to hang out for a while? If he has the Tesseract he can come back, right? Pick you up? Aren't taxi duties a king thing?"

"Is this," waving the same hand, fingers curled listlessly, "for me?"

"Uh, Tesseract actually, because it's fucking creepy and kind of evil and I want it off my fucking tower, because sweaty workmen, evil cube, not a good combination because evil sweaty workmen, just no, but hey, you know, now that you mention it, why not?"

Loki shook his head. "I am not Thor."
"Uh ..." Tony held up a thinking finger. "Obvious."

"You misunderstand. I am a monster, not -- not -- not some wretched creature to save with mealy words and sugared drinks."

" Seriously?" Bruce said. Tony ignored him.

"Dude, you threw me out of a window. I'm pretty sure I know you're a dickbag."

Loki sighed, and he looked so little Tony kind of wanted to give him a Captain America plushie with a little shield to carry around. "So I did."

Tony patted him on the shoulder, not minding so much when Loki hissed and slipped out from under his hand. Iron Man's hand. Fair enough. "Well, you've got a few hours to make up your mind. Jarvis, call Steve."

Loki was giving him a flat look now. "You planned this."

"Surprised?"

"Midgardians," like it was a curse. "So pitiful."

Tony held up the thinking finger again. "I'm sorry, who was it that found your long-lost kid? That would be that guy there." He waved at Bruce.

"The geophysicist did most of it," Bruce said, soft, and he awkwardly waved at Loki, who'd turned to stare at him. "Uh, hi."

"You performed your extravagant act of charity for what purpose, exactly?" he snarled.

"Because I'm not that mean?"

He scoffed. It was a damn descriptive scoff.

"Because a lot of people call me a monster too? Try that one."

"Is this an attempt to win my sympathy? My overweening gratitude?"

Bruce stared back. "I don't want either. I don't like you. I just don't like kids being taken away from people who actually give a damn about them."

Loki's entire face twisted at that, and blood seeped into the side of the bandages Tony could see. "I'll not thank you."

"Good. Don't."

Tony cleared his throat and waved between them, interrupting the match of Intense Stares. "Guys, guys, focus. Loki, finish your damn smoothie. Let's get this stuff broken down for Thor to go hyperspace."

He was really, really happy to see Steve a minute later and not too soon. "Capsicle! Big fella needs a nap."

Loki wound the scarf back around his face, glared at all of them, gave Bruce an extra-long vicious one for good measure, and nodded at Tony. "I'll consider it." He vanished from sight.
"Do I want to know?"

"Uh ... no. Go. Seriously, I think he's gonna fall over any minute. Go go."

Steve shook his head at him -- seriously, what did Tony say to deserve it already? come on -- and left, holding the flap for Loki and dropping it behind him, quivering in the wake of someone other than Steve.

"That went well," Selvig said neutrally.

"It was a disaster." Tony sucked glumly on his smoothie, then gagged and held it at arm's length. "I don't even like kiwi."
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Sexism, obliviousness, victim-blaming. Would you believe me if I said I didn't enjoy upping the fuckedupness?

Nah, me either.

So of course that's when Thor turns up. Bruce contemplates how much he hates his life and finds the amount to be pretty stable, actually. A lot a lot a lot. Forever. Everything. All the time.

"I hear you are testing a shield against Asgard," Thor said, hovering at the edge of the tent. It was like he was actually asking permission to come in, and Tony waved him over.

"Yeah, yeah, we are. Seems to work okay. You know, mix up this, plop in the strongest stuff you beat up, we've got a good chance."

Thor let the flap fall behind him, face very serious. "You must destroy it after I return with the Tesseract."

"Excuse me? Actually, excuse you. What the hell for?"

He let out a rumbling sigh. "It is forbidden. You cannot use this for your own gain."

Bruce winced and edged behind a screen and half-behind Selvig, who was chewing his thumbnail and listening with a face that said he was adding things up. This wasn't gonna go well.

"Okay, explain to me why I have to destroy my tech, that you helped me with, to make you feel better."

"It is forbidden to withhold your realm from Asgard."

Tony's jaw dropped. "You have to be kidding. What? So carbon-fibre is okay but magic-deflecting stuff isn't? Don't tell me this is about magic."

Thor's entire face tightened, and Bruce sort of wanted to call out a warning, but decided against it. Tony had eyes. He just didn't care. "Your technology and our magic are the same in the eyes of Asgard. You may not use magic against Asgard."

"Even if it stays here? It's the fucking Tesseract, what do you want me to do, exactly? Hand it over with our bare hands and let it make you go evil? There's a really easy solution to this. Stay off our world and don't poke around."

"You are under my protection. I cannot protect you if you shield what do you not wish me to see."

Tony was laughing. "Wow. Wow. You know, this explains so much. You do know how many times I've had this argument, right? I've had it with my dad, with the government, with my directors, the whole fucking world, everybody. Nobody wins but me. Ever. So why don't you just back off?"
"It is forbidden. I have tolerated your women's work, Tony, but this is beyond what I can accept. It is not right for you to use this so."

Whoa.

Bruce wasn't sure he'd ever seen Tony turn that colour before.

"What," very flat, "did you just say to me."

Thor sighed. "Your use of magic, this technology you have. It is wrong, Tony. To use it against us is intolerable."

"I am not using it against you. Jesus fuck. How is a dinky little magic shield hurting you, huh? I have it. That's it. Or do you just want to be overtaken by an evil cube of doom? Also, I am plenty fucking manly, thanks."

Thor looked like he was about to whap Tony across the face. Tony looked like he was going to blast him.

Bruce just wanted to be out of the way.

"It is unnatural. Surely you understand."

"Uh, no. I really don't."

Thor was twitching. "You cannot have this capability. That is the end of it. I will do what I must."

"Whoa, whoa, you're declaring war for this?" Bruce said, forgetting to keep his mouth shut. "That's -- whoa, let's not --"

"You have no fucking idea what I'm capable of, blondie."

"Settle down," Selvig snapped, stepping forward. "Sit your asses down. Thor, we're missing things here. What exactly is the problem with a magic shield on Earth?"

Thor groaned. "Is it active?"

"Yes?"

And then he threw the hammer at it.

It went through, but it had the power of, well, if Bruce had lobbed it, and it made a sad sort of thunk against the opposite wall and fell between. Thor held his hand open, and it flew up, but couldn't get back out until Thor raised his hand and it went up and over.

"That is why. As Prince of Asgard, this power is forbidden to you. You will create a container for the Tesseract. You will then destroy this foul creation. It is dishonourable to your people to carry such abilities. Moreso to wield them against Asgard."

"I'm not. Using. Them. Against you."

"Are you not? Do not think I have not noticed. My brother sleeps with the sound of a monster long forbidden to him, forbidden by the law of my father, and there is no-one else who could have done it. You will cease this madness, this false sympathy. I am taking my brother to Asgard with the Tesseract, and if you argue --"

"If you do not control your tongue, I will speak to your commander."

"You're not talking to Fury right now, are you? I don't march to his drum. You're talking to me. I control this place, okay? They use my tech and my power and my money. Fury gives the orders. I'm the one that makes this place happen. I'm the one that made the Avengers possible. So back the fuck off on calling me unmanly or what the hell you want to throw at me, because I'm a fucking genius and I'm calling the shots. Deal with it."

"This is an act of war."

"I feel like I've said this before. Oh, wait, I have. To your brother. Whatever you do, what you bring here, however it turns out -- it's on you. It's your responsibility if you end up killing millions of us over a fucking crappy little shield that's not even three fucking feet square. Seriously, does no-one fucking listen to me?"

Thor was still twitching. "You know not what you do."

"Oh, I think I know. You know what I think? I think you're pissed off that you might not have the power to do anything you please. You're spoilt, Thor. You're a spoilt little --"

"Enough," Selvig said. "Enough. Calm down. What's this about unmanly? You didn't have a problem with Jane being a scientist."

Thor was visibly and obviously keeping his eyes fixed on Tony, and Tony made faces back at him. But he sounded sort of civil with Selvig. Goody for Selvig. Bad for Bruce. He edged into peripheral vision again and double-checked that everything was backed up in case Thor started hammering things.

"Jane is a woman. Magic, your science, is her art. It is right. For a man to use it, and so well at that -- I have tolerated it, Selvig, I have tolerated that he does not have the right of birthing. I have done my best. I have tried. But this is too much. This cowardice is far too much."

Tony was giving him extremely speculative looks. "That's your problem with Loki?"

"One of them," irritated. "He would -- he refused to learn a warrior's way and stole our victories with his tricks. He would allow himself capture and reappear as he pleased. It is a coward's way."

"So it wasn't just that he did it. It was that he was better than you and he didn't have to stop being better than you 'cause he could get pregnant, right? Better, than you, on a technicality. Oh, this is classic. That's perfect, it really is. You don't care about my tech. I don't think you even care about me, and that's fine, I mean, I'm me, that's fine, but as long as you're working with me, you're going to tolerate me and my work, and my fucking genius, as long as it saves your ass and lets you feel special. But if it might actually hurt you or make you feel like you're not Mr Magnificent, if maybe there's a sign on the club that says you're not invited, it's time to pull out the death threats? Are you just that fucking self-centered? I mean, this is coming from me. I know self-centered."

"What do you expect of me?" Thor bellowed. "I AM TRYING."

"I expect a little fucking RESPECT!"

Thor stepped back, hands in fists. "I do. You are clever, and brave, and you have great courage. That is why I do not understand your reason for persisting with this art. You should know the
"Really? Really? You know what, I'm -- I'm done. I'm done with this."

"I am not," Thor snarled, and grabbed his arm. "You claim to be what you are not."

"People, calm down."

Tony stared up at Thor, so angry that Bruce could see the force of his personality coalesce around him, and that was the thing about Tony. Tony spread his power around. He wore it, and it billowed and went back and forth and was more generous than Tony probably realised.

But when he brought it in, and held close the knowledge of exactly what he could do to anyone, to anything, it was terrifying. It terrified Bruce.

A terrible privilege, indeed.

"You need to let go," Tony said, so soft. "Now."

Bruce wasn't sure what Thor made of it, but he saw death, and Harlem, and rubble, and a man who could have just as easily dropped the nuke as carried it if he'd been even slightly a different person.

Whatever it was he saw in that frozen minute of staring straight into the eyes of Tony Stark, former war profiteer and current world dominator, Thor lifted his chin and let go. "You risk my wrath too easily."

"I'm prepared to. Does that make me a coward to you?"

Thor shook his head. "It makes you brave and foolish."

"I can live with that," Tony said, and the cold calm relaxed a little, the lines of his body softening again. "Can you?"

"It is still not acceptable that you have this power."

"Then you're fucked," Tony said pleasantly. "I'd say sorry, but I'm not. You've happily sat by while we killed each other and called it all well and good, oh, they're just killing each other, that's just fine, but when I get the power to maybe take yours away from you the way you can to us whenever you land here, you call me the asshole here?" He leaned forward. "I'm making the case for the Tesseract. You're going to take it home with you. I'll deal with the fallout here. But I'm keeping the tech. You're just going to have to trust me."

"I do not trust you with my brother."

"That's fine. I don't trust him with you."

"What --"

Tony coughed. "Horse."

Thor threw up his hands. "You are -- it was a tale. You asked, Man of Iron. You asked me to tell it!"

"You didn't have to laugh," Bruce said. "It wasn't funny. It just ... wasn't funny."

"It is a horse," Thor said, with a half-grin. "It will never not be funny. Do you not have tales of your brothers doing foolish things?"
Selvig cleared his throat. "Thor, the way we heard it, your brother was raped, and you think it's funny."

Thor shook his head at them, pitying. "My friends, it is entirely his responsibility. For what other reason would he have become a mare, if not to lure a stallion to the haybed? He was clever enough to have turned to a fox if he wished. A mare?" He laughed. "Please."

"I can't," Tony said, apparently to the world in general. "I just -- I can't. Selvig! Can you -- he's your friend, you handle him."

"Thor, we don't -- if Jane was raped, would you say she asked for it?"

"Either she accepted responsibility for false promises, or he was not warrior enough to convince her of his worthy suit," Thor said, shrugging though he kept breaking into a grin. "Though it is polite to ask the father. You did not give permission, so I did not." He looked proud, and on the verge of a giggling fit. "Know this: I am merciful, for Asgard. I did not ask if she could turn to a mare herself."

"OUTSIDE." Tony looked like he hadn't expected to be quite that loud, and he waved at them. "Just. Go outside. More room there. It's not funny. I have work to do. Out."

Selvig patted Thor's arm, and Bruce watched as his grin sobered into confusion at the sight of their faces. "Come on, lad."

"Oh, God," Bruce said when they were gone.

Tony made a face. "I don't -- you, I -- okay, you know, if Loki actually wants to go, he can go. Because keeping him would just completely miss the point of asking to start with. But I don't see why the fuck he even would, if it's just that much of a joke to him. I don't give a fuck if he could've turned into a fucking jaguar, it still -- it still happened, right? We've still got that kid hanging about, and I don't give a fuck whose he is, he doesn't deserve -- ah, fuck it." He tapped his fingers on the table. "Jarvis, how much protection do we have for Loki's kid?"

"Six drones on emergency standby," Jarvis said. "Are more required?"

"Double it, that should be okay. Thanks, Jarvis." Tony took a deep breath. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. Cockmongering little puke." He took another deep breath. "Okay. Fine. I'm fine. Anyway. So. So, Loki's a slippery son of a bitch, I don't even believe he was trying all that hard. Not hard to work up a little sweat."

"Pretty sure he was lying, yeah," Bruce said, cautiously coming forward a little. "Still."

"Yeah." Tony stroked his chin, grimacing. "So, did I just almost start an interplanetary war, or did I just almost start an interplanetary war?"

"Uh, both."

"And I did just do it over goddamn Loki? Our arch-enemy? The guy who threw me out of my own fucking window?"

"Yes. Yes, you did," and he relaxed when it was obvious Tony wasn't going to explode.

"And Thor called me -- he basically called me a limpristed little fag right? Because I run a fucking tech company?"

"Yes."
"Fuck, I was hoping I was dreaming. You know, it just -- it just explains so much. I don't even know. I just know I fucking hate principles," Tony said decisively, crisp and sure.

Bruce couldn't help but agree.

There were a lot of things wrong with this situation. Defending Loki was the least of what just happened, and that was just ... sad. Very, very sad.

Both for what it said about Asgard and what it said about them.

There was a long moment.

"Fury's going to kill me, isn't he?"

"Yes," Bruce said, not bothering to hide the smile. "Oh, yes, he is."

"I hate my life."

Bruce just had to laugh.
Natasha backstory, more obliviousness, Selvig is the unsung hero of the Avengers and I'm standing by that opinion, and Fury's life is hard.

"Would someone like to share with the class what the fuck is going on here?" Fury demanded.

They were seated around the meeting table, crammed in beside each other, and Stark had the flat eyes of somebody stewing in a terrible mood and Thor looked terribly guilty.

Clint wasn't tired of the sheer fucking drama of this team yet, it was still pretty entertaining, but it was getting close and he missed Coulson so. fucking. much.

Nat sighed across from him and nudged his foot with the point of her toe, and he nodded. They'd trade off being the rudder if they had to, Nat did way too much of it already, and if things came to the worst -- well, Clint had his knives, and Nat had herself.

"I lost my temper," Thor said into the silence, staring at his hands. "It is a terrible flaw. I am sorry, Tony."

Stark was scowling at him over his sunglasses. "Yeah, okay, you know what, okay. But do you know why I got so pissed off? I mean, there were a lot of reasons, but tell me you have a guess. Please tell me you have a guess."

"You also kind of ... blew up," Banner said, and Clint saw him fidget. "Uh, they had a fight."

"Oh, for God's sake," Fury muttered. "Well?"

"Yeah. I blew up. I still want to know if he gets why."

Thor sighed. "I do, now. A little. You must --" He broke off, visibly choosing his words. "I ask you to understand."

Stark was still scowling, but he jerked his hand. "Can't promise anything, but I'm listening. I'm still pissed off, mind you."

"I do not ask you not to be." Thor swallowed hard. "It is ... Selvig explained," nodding to the head of the table where he sat beside Fury, arms folded and his hair horribly ruffled. He looked like a deranged porcupine.

"So? What are you going to say for yourself, huh?"

Clint almost wanted to tell Stark to give the guy a fucking break, but Thor was working up to something, and he bit his tongue instead.

"I was afraid, Tony. I was afraid that Loki was ... influencing you. I am afraid that he will be set free, through little fault of your own but his words, and I will return to a wasteland, and all your corpses scattered upon it." He set his hands flat on the table, Mjolnir conspicuously not in the room. Clint
thought he looked seriously tired for a god. The idea of a god getting tired was weird. "I am afraid that I will not be able to protect you. I swore an oath to protect this world."

"We can handle ourselves," Clint said.

Thor shrugged. "I know. You say that. You have shown it. But you are so mortal, and small. You are so fragile. It is much too easy to imagine."

Stark muttered irritably to himself, then spoke up. "Anyone ever tell you you worry too fucking much?"

Thor shook his head. "No. Never. I have not had cause to worry. I worried for my brother at times, but never seriously until I returned from my banishment. He always seemed -- cowardly, but also -- I did not think of his failing to be beside me. Even now there is a gap where he should be."

"So basically you're completely emotionally retarded," Clint said, then hissed at a kick from Nat. "I mean, feelings are weird."

"Yes." Thor looked at all of them, blue eyes bright and worried. "You have put my brother's son within his reach. Why do you do this?"

Bruce cleared his throat. "I thought it might be nice. You know. Give Loki something to prove we're not completely awful."

"I said to," Fury said. "Easy enough to give him a little, get a little. He'd have slipped out of our hands otherwise, you get that?"

"Yeah, well, maybe you should have asked," Tony snapped. "Did you ever fucking ask about anything?"

Thor met his eyes. "I did not need to. I was -- as you said. I was ignorant, and spoilt." He nodded to Steve. "There are many things I have not needed to know. Things I ought to have said. But I did not, and now he weeps over the sound of a child we feared he would kill, and I know not what to think."

"But the part about getting him off Asgard and putting him down here because he was too big is true, right?" Clint shrugged at Tony's huffy eyebrows. "Just checking."

Thor nodded. "Yes. But they were already forbidden to my brother."

"Enough. It's done, and I'm not taking back the tit for my tat," Fury said. "Stark has drones ready to defeat whoever comes near the kid. Acceptable?"

Thor nodded slowly. "Yes."
"Good. What else? Hurry up, people. I've got the council crawling up my ass."

"Point two, and most important, he said my tech was girly and we're not allowed to have the magic shield I'm building for the Tesseract handover." Stark pointed at Thor. "For the record, not girly. I'm badass. Learn it. Bad. Ass."

"Oh. I don't count?" Nat said, fake-innocent.

"Uh -- wait. That's a trick question. No comment."

"Shut it, Stark. Well?" Fury thumped the table. "How much time in a day do you think I have?"

"Those outside Asgard are not to bar themselves to Asgard justice." Thor looked unhappy. "We travel as we wish."

Nat frowned in a way that Clint would never, ever tell her was kind of adorable. "We have a concept called sovereignty. Do you have it?"

"It does not apply to the realms of monsters and mortals," Thor said, and somehow looked even more earnestly unhappy. "Only Asgard."

Fury sighed. "Your foreign policy needs some serious work. You realise each and every country here has foreign policy? Most of them are pretty damn explicit about attacking invading forces."

"We do not invade Midgard."

"But you do other places," Fury said. "What's the difference between them and us?"

"It is not sporting to hunt those so weak," Thor muttered. "'tis a child at play."

Clint could almost feel the size of Fury's migraine.

"What happens now that we've proven we're not weak?" Fury fixed the Stare on Thor. It was a good stare. It was the one that made Clint cringe as a teenager cutting and dyeing his hair in Fury's sink and forgetting to tidy up the clippings. "I for one would like to know."

"Me too," Banner said. "The other guy's ... really powerful, but, uh, there's only one of me."

Thor actually squirmed. "I don't know. We wish peace with your people, but how can we achieve it if you withhold your goodwill?"

"What goodwill? See, this is exactly my fucking problem --"

"Shut. It."

Stark actually did, but he was pouting.

"Right. How does building a magic shield have anything to do with Earth's goodwill toward your people?"

"Heimdall. He is our Gatekeeper and the most powerful in all Asgard, more than the All-Father, and it is his oath to defend and protect all the realms at the command of the king. He cannot protect what he cannot see, and my brother has long had tricks to hide himself for a time and cause great chaos."

"And I built something he might not be able to see through and you freaked out," Tony said.
Thor sighed. "I don't like your phrasing, but yes. There are more forces in the universe than you know. Many are malevolent, and more numerous than the Chitauri."

"So basically you're actually a giant worrywart," Tony said. "Look, I'm not giving it up. I don't care about your gatekeeper."

Thor looked like he was going to start shouting, but he took a very, very deep breath instead, thunder sounding in the distance when he let it go. "Then we are at an impasse. What do you suggest, then?"

"Like I said. Trusting me." He spread his hands. "I know it's hard, but come on. I'm not --" He grimaced. "Look, I'm not a total dickbag. I took out the Chitauri with a fucking nuke, okay? I know what I'm doing, and my plan right now -- you know what, seriously, I shouldn't even have to say this, but I will. You see those guys there?"

He pointed at Selvig and Bruce, an index finger for each, and turned them on himself.

"We're the three of us in the world that even know anything about how to make it, and they're sitting right here. I am the only person in the fucking world, including Loki, because I am not fucking stupid, that can bring it all together. I'm building the Tesseract jar from scratch. Anyone else tried, it'd be like getting a broom and calling it Mjolnir."

He leaned over the table, dangerously close to Thor, and Clint made a warning noise. Stark flicked a hand at him and got back into Thor's face.

"I can promise you right here, right now," stabbing the table, "that the only place I will ever use it, ever allow it to be used, is on the Tesseract, my houses, that tent out there, and my tower. That's it. Either you take my word for it or you don't."

He sat back, dusting off the hem of his jacket.

"I cannot think very clearly on this subject," Thor said. "I worry for this realm. I will return with the Tesseract and consult my father. He has great wisdom. I will abide by his command."

"We settled? That settled? Got anything more to say, Stark?"

"Not on that issue." He scowled at Thor. "My word's actually worth a lot, I'll have you know."

"So is mine."

"Enough! God, what the fuck are you, a pack of schoolkids? Grow up. Next."

Clint raised an eyebrow at Nat; she shook her head. So apparently it got worse. Fantastic. He settled in, resting his fingers beside the knife strapped to his thigh, and really, really missed Coulson.

Bruce waved a hand. "Uh, there were ... problems ... uh, the horse story."

Stark cleared his throat, theatrically examining his nails and adjusting his tie. "Apparently rape is a-okay on Asgard."

Thor stood up, slamming the table. "That is not what I--"

"YOU FUCKING DID --"

Fury bellowed inarticulately.

They shut up.
He pointed at Thor. "Sit."

Thor sat.

He pointed at Stark. "Sit."

Stark sat.

They folded their arms and pouted at each other.

Clint really, really, really, really missed Coulson, oh my fucking God.

"Now," in tones of great and completely forced calm, "somebody explain. You gotta use small words, because if one of you, even one of you, starts screaming again I swear to fuck I will have you all arrested for wasting my time. Doctor Selvig. Care to shed some light on the situation?"

The good doctor -- really, Selvig was Clint's favourite, second to Nat, the guy had a great head on his shoulders -- sighed and straightened. "Asgard culture is not our culture."

Stark rolled his eyes opened his mouth; Fury pointed warningly.

"Thank you, Director Fury," very civil. "I believe we've underestimated the extent of the differences and the similarities. Asgard sex customs are very different to American ones. What we take as asking a parent for permission to rape their child is in fact something else entirely. It is permission to court. A warrior has to persuade a woman with evidence of, ah, his prowess, until she, er, accepts him."

"Exactly. I would not --"

Fury growled.

Thor shut up.

Phil, Phil, Phil, I miss you.

Selvig gave them the stinkeye and went on. "However, while women warriors are extremely rare in Asgard, it is believed that every woman will fight when needed and are trained to be. That includes potential rapists. And failed suitors."

Banner shook his head, half-smiling. "I don't buy it. I don't buy it. I just don't -- so when you said she wanted it if she didn't fight, you were serious?"

Thor opened his mouth, then glanced at Fury, who nodded. "Yes. It is not shameful to be defeated by a woman. It is shameful to disappoint one enough to risk defeat at all."

"But -- what about coercion? Doesn't it ever happen that, you know, emotional blackmail or whatever?"

"It is a great wrong." Thor shrugged. "You forget that we begin our training as children. By courting season both parties are capable of harming the other should offense be given. My Jane -- Selvig spoke for her decision when she refused to assist me, and so I did not take offense. Neither did I approach her. It was she whom approached me, and it is well. Your mortal women are fragile."

Tony stared. "Then why the fuck didn't you just say that?"

"I did," Thor said, and folded his arms. "You twisted my words."
"I don't speak for Jane," Selvig said. "She speaks for herself."

Thor pursed his lips. "Perhaps. She is clever. The clever are not easily restrained. But she was also so kind-hearted that it did not matter overmuch. Her intent was not to offend."

"That still doesn't explain the horse story," Bruce said, and the resentful tic along his jaw had Nat brushing his foot with hers. Yeah, he saw just fine. "You said some terrible things there."

"Had he wished to fight, he would have," Thor said impatiently. "That he refused and still refuses is not my responsibility."

Nat tipped her head curiously and ignored Clint's eyebrow. "Does courting start at eight?"

"No." He seemed annoyed. "I do not wish to speak with you."

Fury folded his arms. "Too bad. You all can't handle this shit yourselves, I'm handling it for you. Continue, Agent."

"I'm trying to figure out the situation. So despite the fact that he hadn't courted yet and your father threatened to have him killed if he didn't think of something to distract the horse, you blame him for miscalculating?"

"He should not have spoken. It was not the first time he tried to interfere with matters that were none of his affair. If he did not wish to be taken seriously, he should not have given advice to begin with. He should have expected our father to lose patience."

"Did your father ever lose patience with you?"

Thor's mouth thinned. "Rarely."

"And with him?" Nat raised an eyebrow.

"Often," Thor said, grudgingly like he'd anticipated the question, and sighed. "I do not see the relevance."

So Thor wanted to drag this out. That was okay by Clint. It was obvious Thor had no idea how much Nat wouldn't let him.

"I do," she said, and she looked Thor in the face. "I was pregnant when I was nine. Do you think I deserved it?"

Clint saw Bruce make a choked noise, and Stark give Nat a long, long look. Cap, though -- Cap didn't look surprised at all. So she'd told him beforehand.

That explained why he'd been so quiet, why he probably intended to keep quiet until the end. Cap was too much of a peacekeeper, and he and Nat balanced each other out too much already to really direct anything. It was one or the other right now with their incredibly depressing personal histories, and Nat was stepping up.

Her voice was so steady, and honestly, Clint admired her. She didn't care about this stuff, but she'd built her whole career on what other people thought of her, and here she was, doing her job. Goddamnit, nobody appreciated her enough. Except Fury and Coulson. But they could, and she seemed okay with that, which was actually kind of a miracle compared to what she'd been like at the first inkling that any of them appreciated her at all.
"I am sorry for --"

"I didn't ask for your sympathy," shaking her head. "Do you think I deserved it?"

"No," Thor muttered, slouching down in the chair.

"Is it funny that I was raped when I nine?"

"No." He looked outright uncomfortable. Too bad. "I am sorry, but --"

"I'm not finished. If it's not funny and I didn't deserve it, why is it different for him?"

Thor growled low in his throat, but stayed put when Fury lifted a warning finger. "It is not at all the same."

"I'm the one with a uterus at this table and I think it is," Nat said.

"He did not have to," Thor snapped. "It was to teach him a lesson to hold his lying tongue. The word of a frost giant is meaningless. All he had to do was remember that in his childish, arrogant play at wisdom and it would have been fine. But no, that was far too simple, and thus he made a fool of himself, and created a tale of one child's absolute ignorance. How can it not be funny? It is absurd."

Stark was shaking his head, pale. "You set him up. Your dad set him up. Worst dad ever. I -- I actually feel lucky now, somebody hit me."

Clint obliged.

"Ow, fuck you! Thanks."

Nat was eyeing Thor. "What did you do? He obviously didn't give birth immediately."

Thor sighed. "I was forbidden to find him. I searched regardless, but I could not find him. It was considered -- if he had lost himself in the woods it was worthy punishment. My father is a good man," he said, looking at all of them so terribly earnestly like he actually believed it, and Clint -- Clint knew what brainwashing felt like. He'd seen it.

Thor's eyes were already blue but it didn't change a damn thing. No-one needed a spear for this sort of work, just time, authority and a delicate hand, and apparently Odin had all three in spades.

"Thor, that's pretty much the definition of a shitty father."

"It was not his fault."

Nat sat back in her chair, crossing her arms. "So whose was it? Loki's?"

"Our father truly did not think he would take such measures," Thor said quietly. "I -- I did not see his desperation. I did not care to see. I still do not, and yet I am beginning to. I have no more to say."

Nat smiled. "You're not done. I have one more question. Imagine that instead of him, it was me, and I was on a mission to please a handler that I had no way of knowing would kill me or praise me from one hour to the next, and I was raped by my target as part of my mission. Here's the thing. I wasn't told it would happen. I had no idea what my handler wanted me to do. You could say it was my mistake that I didn't just kill him. But I didn't because I wanted to stay alive. Because I wanted to please my handler. Is that funny?"

Thor glared. "No," voice strangely soft. "But it is not the same."
Just as soft: "Are you sure?"

Thor pressed his lips shut and said nothing, and the silence stretched.

Fury sighed at all of them. "Tell me we're done."

"Uh, no! Actually!"

Clint saw Natasha wince sympathetically, and totally understood. That was a huge vein to be throbbing like that.

"Stark," Fury ground out. "What is it?"

"He called me a girl." Stark had his hand up in the air, but there was nothing funny about it. "I wanna register an objection."

He closed his eyes briefly -- probably to pray to somebody -- and turned to Thor. "Now, why did you do that?"

"Our technology is the same as their magic," Selvig said. "It's traditionally a woman's domain, and very few men have the ... wombs necessary. Er, the ones that do might use it in secret, but to show it in public or rely on it without backup is ... frowned upon. Actually it seems that the business with the horse legitimised Loki's claim even if it confused everything else."

"So basically it makes you a girl." He rolled his eyes and turned to Thor. "You thought I was him and you freaked out," Stark said to Thor. "We are nothing alike. Don't you have eyes? I can see them. You HAVE EYES. They even work. Use them! I can even show you my dick if you want. Wanna see my dick? I've got great reviews on Amazon. I got a cast made," he said to Banner. "It's one of their top sellers."

Fury pinched the bridge of his nose. "Stark ..."

"I'm pretty sure that counts as sexual harassment," Nat murmured.

"Yes, you are very different," Thor said agreeably. "You seek mastery of forces beyond your ken and your senseless spite of the world around you is poorly concealed by the guise of a jester."

"Zing," Clint said, actually kind of impressed.

"Oh, my God. You were sarcastic. I didn't know you had it in you." He licked his finger and drew in the air. "One point to Thor for delivery, minus a million points for lack of originality, sooo ... Tony 1, Thor 0. Sorry. But seriously, I'm not a girl. No offense."

"None taken. I don't want you in my gender."

"Yowza, Agent, I'm seriously hurt here."

Nat gave him a look of faux-concern. "Ohh."

Thor was looking at them like they were insane. Clint -- Clint kind of had to agree, yeah. This team, seriously.

Fury growled again. "If that's all quite fucking settled?"

"I'm out of strawberries," Stark said.
Chapter 19

Steve had a lot to think about. Too much. Post-meeting the others went their ways, not really speaking, and he volunteered and drifted to Loki's cell with his shield and the sketchbook again and a thermos that was amazingly still as warm as it was twenty minutes ago. He wanted to try drawing how strange the magic barrier looked, how it rippled like heatwaves off asphalt but down, not up, ending at some vague point that was different every time he looked. It was probably impossible to draw, but he could at least try.

Loki was awake when he got back, lying listlessly under the blanket, petting the screen with lidded eyes.

He tapped the wall as a courtesy, and wasn't surprised when Loki mustered up a half-hearted sneer. Either he was doing a damn good job of pretending to be exhausted or he actually was, and either way Steve was fine with playing along. It didn't matter much.

"Hey," slipping inside the cell. It smelled a bit, but not the way people smelled, or they had in the army. It smelled like the way just-poured soda felt on his nose, a little prickly and itchy and something to wait out. "I know Tony gave you lots of those fruit drinks, but they're not very good for you. I thought you might like to try some soup."

Loki eyed him some more, and Steve remained standing precisely six steps in from the door and four left of it, far away enough to let Loki think he had a chance of slipping past and close enough to ensure that he didn't. It was important to let him see the door, anyway. Before he'd learned to get out of the way as fast as possible he'd had to bleach more than a few scrapes from people clawing at him. It made sense, really. The bars were their only source of light, and a door was a door.

"They were very sweet," Loki said, croaky-sounding, and sat up. His hair was an absolute mess, feathered and tangled, and Steve dug in his back pocket for a comb and put it onto the blanket. "Soup is broth, correct?"

"Well, this has a little more. Cut-up noodles, some vegetables. I wasn't sure if you ate meat after Angrboda."

Loki shook his head, but appeared generally unsurprised that they knew about that too. It made Steve wonder how many of the myths were the Asgard equivalent of bathroom graffiti. "I prefer not to." He beckoned impatiently with his free hand, the other busily working on the bandages, and Steve put down the shield and knelt, unscrewing the lid.

"I don't know how much you've had to eat through the tube, so be careful. It's hot."

"I'm not an infant," Loki said, bristling, and Steve let him snatch the cup from his hand. His expression when he tasted it was curious, a mix of uncertainty and pleasure. "You cut yourself."

"What?"

"When you prepared this, you cut yourself."

"Oh, sorry. I thought I washed everything well enough. I haven't cooked in a while. Is that -- I can make more."

"No." Loki shook his head, sipping again. "It's not every day I'm able to taste the blood of Captain
Steve grimaced and made himself comfortable on the floor a little away. Too close and Loki would bristle; too far and Loki would bristle. 'Too close' was slowly decreasing, though; he could reach over and touch the cuff of his trousers if he put effort into it. "When you put it that way I'm more inclined to make a new batch."

Loki shrugged. "It's a suitable spice. You're not here to make pleasantries."

"No. Mostly I was a bit worried that you were upset."

"Oh?" silky. "What have I to be upset for?"

Steve shrugged a shoulder, shaking his head. "I'm honestly not sure I know where to start."

Loki rolled his eyes. "Petty torments mean nothing to me."

Steve waved at the screen still showing the outline of Jorgumandur. It'd shifted, but very slightly, and the heartbeat continued to throb steadily. "I see that."

"Antagonist is my role to play, not yours," Loki said crisply, much smoother now that he'd wet his throat. The marks on his face were mostly healed, the holes in his cheeks plugged with dark brown clots and his tongue able to roll his ls as he spoke. The swelling had gone down, and without it his face was even thinner, the arch of one cheekbone visibly chipped. "What is your purpose?"

Steve wondered why a shapeshifter kept so many marks.

"Beyond making sure you get something to eat? A little peace and quiet, actually. You might have noticed the Avengers are a noisy bunch."

"Yes." He looked sour. "I've met them."

Steve nodded, opening the sketchbook. "Do you mind if I draw you again?"

Loki really did have an expressive face, and right now it wore the disbelief Steve was slowly getting used to seeing. "Do you have nothing better to do?"

"I've done everything that needs doing. I could scrub latrines, but I'd rather not."

"Oh, very well. If you must bother me."

Steve tested the page and pen, glancing between Loki and the paper as Loki slowly drank the entire thermos and picked up the comb to unknot his hair, frowning as he pulled apart tangles.

He ignored Steve the entire time.

"Have you sat for portraits before?"

"Yes. 1762 if I remember your calender correctly." His tone suggested that if he misremembered the calendar was wrong, not the other way around. "A city called Florence. The artist was a smelly little thing, but his render was adequate." Loki sniffed. "Never travel to a time wherein mortals wear colonies of lice upon their heads."

Steve had to smile at that; he remembered the tales of wives delousing their husband's hair. "I won't," he said easily. "I've spent enough time with nits."
Loki eyed him, then paused his combing and gave Steve's hair a very suspicious look.

"Oh, not right now, I just ... ah, it was before. I think the ice killed them."

"Hmm." One thin eyebrow lifted skeptically, and he flicked his fingers in distaste. "Move away."

Steve laughed, scooting backwards. "Far enough?"

"Sufficient."

They sat in quiet for a while, Loki still combing his hair, eyes half-closed.

"You're right, though. I have an ulterior motive." Steve kept drawing. "I know Tony mentioned staying a while."

"I am here because I choose to be," Loki sneered. "Your permission or mine does not matter in the slightest."

"It matters to me," Steve said. "Do you want to return to Asgard?"

If he'd thought Loki's other expressions were unsubtle, this one took the cake.

"That's not actually an answer," Steve said.

"No," Loki snapped. "If I had my freedom and none of the ridiculous yoke you have placed on me, I would never return. It is dead to me, all of it, all of them, as I am to them. They are as nothing."

"So stick around."

"My brother," thin, fine contempt, "declares otherwise. Who am I to argue?"

Steve looked up into the pressure of those eyes. It was the eyes that made him so thoroughly alien, something about how they reflected the light, their liquidity. It wasn't complexity or colour, but depth all the way down into ... well, Steve didn't know. "You're you."

Loki rolled his eyes, his tone sardonic. "You positively gush with insight. Why, I fear I've never thought of that before. How kind of you to alert me."

"I could describe you as I see you," Steve said thoughtfully. "You're cruel, capricious, and petty. If a lie is a knife, you're the one who twists it with a truth. You don't think a lot of anyone or anything."

"Particularly you," Loki snaps. "You should be dead a thousand times over for your familiarity."

"Maybe, but I'm not and I wasn't finished. You've been handed a raw deal on a godly scale and you dealt with it in ways I can't even imagine. I mean, I was at war for a few years and I'm a mess. But the fact that you lasted as long as you did before seriously hurting a lot of people -- I think that's admirable. I don't condone it, but it's worth noticing."

"If you wish to masturbate there are other places to do so. I'm sure one of these strapping young guards would assist you."

Steve sucked in a breath. "I didn't deserve that."

Something flared in Loki's eyes. "Why? Because it's wrong?" he spat.

"Because it's cruel," Steve said. "To them. They're doing a job. I'm not going to take advantage of
anyone that way."

"Your point, Captain Rogers."

"Right. My point." He studied the edges of the shield, the paintjob still scraped from the battle. He sort of liked it that way; the glossiness of everything still unsettled him. "You've got a choice here. It's not a binding one. Staying isn't the same as agreeing to never go anywhere, or never do anything, or never go back. It's temporary. But you'll need to say something to Thor yourself, because the longer you stay quiet the longer he's going to take it as an answer he likes."

Loki laughed. "You are profoundly naive. My brother does not ask a monster for anything."

Steve considered him. "What if he does? What if he does ask if you want to go with him. What will you do?"

Loki shrugged. "Whatever irritates him the most."

Steve tried not to sound too gentle; Loki took to kindness about as well as a starving rat. See hand, bite it. "We both know what that is, don't we?"

"Do we," irascible all over again.

"Whatever you decide is up to you. Just -- think about what you actually want. I'll make sure he asks. If I don't, Tony will."

Loki felt like he was interested, oddly enough, the sense of him changing, and Steve looked up to see him crinkle his eyebrows. "Stark commands respect," he said, half a question.

"Tony's powerful. I don't really understand how powerful, myself. That kind of money didn't exist before. But yes, people listen to him. Usually there's shouting."

"He gained it himself?"

Steve wobbled his pencil back and forth. "A lot of the money came from his father's inventions. Howard. I knew him. But the rest, the power and fame, most of it is him. He's -- admired, I suppose. Very few people like him, but very few people say he's not brilliant, either."

Loki drew his knees to his chest, an arm folded across his knees and his free hand returning to the screen to pet it. It was easy to see why he slicked his hair back usually -- like this it fell in soft waves around his face in a way that tilted the look of him into being very feminine. It made him quite striking, and Steve started to sketch it.

He was glad that he'd made the decision to let Loki have a little of Jorgumandur without making it conditional on anything. The way Loki touched the screen reminded him of how some women cradled rags in place of their lost children, and Steve liked being able to do some honest good.

"And you?"

Steve paused. "You mean do I like him? I'm not sure. I think so. He's rude and difficult and I think some of it is on purpose, but that doesn't mean unlikeable. It just takes time."

Loki scowled. "He is not unintelligent."

"That's the nicest thing I've heard you say about someone," Steve said mildly. "Are you jealous of him?"
That was rewarded with a snarl of contempt. "There is nothing to envy in the life of a wretched little mortal. You are as flies."

He nodded and went back to sketching, and he saw Loki's hand relax where it'd stretched the fabric over his knee.

Then it ripped through the fabric, Loki's body coiling, and Steve looked up to see Thor approaching. Sweet, sweet stupid man.

"Hey," Steve said.

Thor nodded to him. "May I come in?"

The thing that annoyed Steve was that he wasn't asking. It was the kind of pro-forma politeness that proceeded a sucker punch. The other thing was that he'd completely overlooked his brother.

If this was typical, Loki had good reason for his cynicism.

"No," Loki snarled, and Steve struggled not to remember where he'd heard that kind of hate before.

There was a point to make, though, and Steve was willing to make it. "Well, you heard him. There's a chair there, though, pull it up."

Thor stood there for a while, but Steve wasn't inclined to back down. Eventually he sat, picking at his fingernails. Did they all do that?

"I would speak with you, brother."

Loki was snarling, hadn't stopped, growling low in his throat, and said nothing.

Thor sighed.

He cleared his throat and got between them a little. "What do you want out of this conversation?"

"I -- I wished to apologise. I know not what I have done, but --"

Steve cut him off. "No. If you don't know enough to know what you're apologising for, you shouldn't be apologising."

"The Tesseract's container is almost complete. He will come with me."

"That's up to him."

Thor stared at Steve, gesturing to Loki. "You would indulge a murderer?"

"What do you think I'm doing with you?" Steve gentled a little. "You've said the only reason you haven't hunted us like animals is because we're not entertaining enough. How should I indulge you?"

"That is not -- well, yes, but my friend, it is not as you think --"

"Thor, gratitude only works when you do something on purpose. Overlooking us wasn't about kindness. It was that you didn't care. I'm not going to thank you for not caring."

Thor sighed through his nose. "You are vexing."

Steve relaxed a little. "We're human."
"You are mortal," Loki said behind him, and Steve turned to see himself being given an extremely odd look, quickly smoothed. "You have no place in this affair."

"I understand that I might not agree with what you choose when Tony's finished the Tesseract -- if you'll stay or go -- but I'll defend to the death your right to decide."

Loki looked -- well, he looked completely taken aback. "You are foolish beyond your imagination." As insults went, it was very weak.

"Maybe," Steve said, and turned back to Thor. "But that's what I believe, and I'll stand for it. Even against you. Even if it means standing against you for him."

Loki giggled from behind him. "How does it feel, brother?"

"You will be silent," Thor growled.

"No, he won't."

"This is not your concern." He got up, marching to the wall and putting his fingers against it, and the plate glass began to creak, hairline cracks spreading.

The SHIELD guards turned their guns on him, safeties clicking off.

"You don't wanna do that," Steve said, readying his shield.

Thor slowly lowered his hand. "I only wished to speak to him."

"That works better if you actually do," Steve observed.

"Loki." Thor stared at him, at his little brother, and Steve could read the cajoling, the desperation, the confused care. But also the need to have Loki fall in line. "Come home. Please come home. We mourned you. We missed you. Come home."

There was a long, long silence.

"No," Loki said from behind him, almost inaudible, and Steve heard the rustle, felt the brush of something moving faster than he could turn.

He was barely surprised when Loki looped the chain back around his neck. He sort of figured that would happen, and he shifted a little to ready himself in case Loki actually tried.

"No. You will take me by force, and when you do," soft and even, pulling hard enough to choke Steve, "I will escape your wretched grasp and I will kill your precious friend. I will kill them all, these people you love so, and wreath your hair in their blood."

Thor's hammer came to his hand. "Loki --"

"He did tell you of my true heritage. He did tell you that I was a monster, as you have always known, as I have always known. Do you truly expect better of me?" very calm and sure against Steve's ear, chainlinks cold and impossibly heavy for their size against his jaw.

But he could feel him quiver, and Steve breathed instead, shallow and difficult, and watched Thor.

"No. But I gave you a chance," Thor said sadly, and Steve stifled the urge to laugh. He knew chances. That hadn't been it. "And you give me nothing but madness. That is all I needed to know."
Loki chuckled against him. "Oh, brother. You seek to wound and find only crevasses where others have been. Does it injure you to know nothing you say can hurt me?"

He really was a damn good liar, cool and confident. Steve would've bought it if he couldn't feel his heart hammering unsteadily against his back.

"It injures me that you hate us so," Thor said, bringing up the hammer to rest on his shoulder. "We have done nothing but treat you as we should."

"You never wanted me," Loki said.

Thor rolled his eyes. "Please, brother, this lie is beneath you. I have loved you. You are my brother. I have always tried to protect you from your foolishness."

"I find there are very few things beneath me." He tightened the coil around Steve's neck, and Steve shifted the shield, gasping.

He wouldn't attack, but if he had to to free himself, he would. But not yet. "Am I disowned, brother? Has Odin opened his hand to the rightful king, or is it to be the whip?"

"You must be punished," Thor said, looking more sure of himself. "You have done great wrongs. Even now you do wrong. Steve has nothing to do with this."

"Yes," perfectly even. "I do not deny that. I deny that you are in a position to lord yourself above me. I, who was king. I deny that I will ever allow it again. Once. No longer."

"You know not what you do."

"To the contrary. Leave, or his death be on your hands."

Thor almost looked like he would attack anyway, even with Loki being able to tear his head off his shoulders faster than Thor could reach him. Steve could see him think about it, and knowing that his life depended on the question of how expendable he was in Thor's eyes chilled him far worse than Loki's chains did.

He expected the casual disregard for life from Loki, who apparently never had a reason to care. Not from Thor, who he'd fought with and commanded, who professed every care.

And Loki -- he could feel it in the press of his teeth against his scalp, the grin. Loki knew it. Knew exactly what Steve was thinking and why and had forced the issue so perfectly.

His cruelty was so extraordinarily precise.

Steve clocked the detente at four minutes before Thor lowered the hammer, gave him a contemptuous glare, and stepped back to the end of the walkway. "Release him."

Loki shook his head, hair brushing against the back of Steve's neck. "I'll not. Not before you leave."

Thor snarled. "I cannot trust you."

"A pity it took you so long to learn that."

That got him a shake of his head. "Kill him after I go," hefting the hammer, "and there will be no world, no moon, no secret path, where I will not find you and execute you as the cowardly murderer you are."
"Ooh."

Thor snarled and left, shoulders bunching angrily, and Steve felt Loki sag and unwrap the chains. Breathing was good, wonderful in fact, and he touched his throat and turned to him, shaking as he was, and offered a smile.

"Well done."

Something was wrong with his face, and Steve lifted shaking fingers, not quite understanding, and felt raw meat and slippery bone, and stumbled at the blood trickling, then torrenting, down his arm and onto the floor.

His own blood. He couldn't see out of one eye. His own blood.

He could feel his tongue through his face, and he touched it to his fingertip, shivering cold. Shock, it was shock, and he looked up at Loki, and the fingernails edged with blood that he dimly recognised as his.

So sharp. So strong. The cuts were so clean.

His own fault, really. Steve should've known better.

Loki was wide-eyed and white. "I -- guards. Guards!"

"Oh, my God, Steve. Steve. What the fuck did you fucking do that for, he was trying to help -- oh, God, Steve, don't you dare fucking pass out for this. Come on."

"Tony," and heard himself slur as he got to his feet, leaning on a shoulder. "Your suit."

"Fuck my suit. Seriously, Loki, what the fuck?"

"What business is it of yours?"

"You sliced up his fucking face!"

"I did not intend --" Loki snapped, then cut himself off. "You had best get the oaf out of my cell. He risks his life, he best not be surprised when it is taken."

"Oh, I'm getting him away from you, trust me. And you -- you -- keep your fucking claws to yourself. Come on, Capiscle. It's just a flesh wound. Nothing to worry about."

Oh, Tony. Of course it was just a flesh wound.

Medics reached him at the end of the hall, loading hypodermics, and Steve looked at Loki as one of them swabbed his arm and injected.

He looked -- almost regretful, lifting a hand and stepping forward, but more guards wrenched him to his knees and forced his head down.

"It's okay," Steve tried to mouth, but there was too much blood and everything was hazy.
Chapter Notes

A lot of you had good points about the confusion of the last part of chapter 19. Keeping the POV that tight was a deliberate choice. Hopefully this chapter clears up some things!

So basically everyone else was stupid. Nothing new there. Steve was packed off, two master assassins and Fury were dealing with Thor's roaring rampage, and Tony -- Tony was being brilliant.

To the commons it'd look like stupidity. But he knew better.

Tony dragged the chair into Loki's cell and waved off the guards around Loki, their gun barrels pressing into his head a bit harder than really necessary. Dude, they were standing on his hands. Uncool. Seriously uncool. "Guys, chill. Chill. Back off."

They did, but reluctantly, and Loki got to his feet, brushing himself down and staring at his hands, flexing them one finger at a time. Looked like nothing was broken, at least.

"Sooooo. Gonna rip off my face too?"

Loki ignored him. Seriously now.

Tony pulled up the surveillance footage from ten minutes earlier on his phone and slowed it down about twenty times, circling a finger to face it Loki's way.

It was frozen on a split-split-split-second expression of absolute terror. Steve was getting up, pivoting to face Loki; Loki's chain was swinging down between them, his hands still in the air from lifting it off Steve's neck, and even in this tiny slowed-down slice of time his fingers were blurred. It was one of those pictures that won Pulitzers. But that terror. He hadn't caught it, Jarvis had. Thank fuck for Jarvis.

"This tells me it was an accident. You freaked out and it was an accident. Was it? Look, I know I yelled before, but seriously, you ripped Steve's face half-off. How do you even cut those things? But yeah, he'll be okay and I'm not, like ... I'm not that angry. Really. I'm just asking if it was an accident because honestly I'm really selfish and kind of attached to my face and one of these days I'm going to get horribly drunk and say nice things. And, you know, I like my face where it is."

Loki shook his head, hissing his words like a scalded cat. "It was not his to praise."

"He does that to everybody. He says nice things to me when he has no clue what I'm doing, just that I'm doing it and he thinks it's awesome I can. Ever think of it being something like that? Anybody tell you you're awesome for something before?"

That got him a glare. That was good, actually, that was really good. Creepy-withdrawn-quiet kids freaked him the fuck out. "In the traditional sense."

Tony blinked. "Oh, the whole 'raising fear' thing. Uhhh no, not what I meant. Anyway. Props for standing up to Thor without killing anybody. I mean that. Don't kill me. Fury will make your life miserable, if you think I'm bad you haven't met Fury."
"What will happen with the Tesseract?"

"Considering I just finished the jar and the lids are cooling right now and it's getting off my tower finally, thank fuck, I actually have no idea other than Thor's taking it back probably tonight or tomorrow. It's too creepy to live here." Tony yawned and picked at the blood drying on his shoulder. "So you're definitely sticking around for a while?"

"Perhaps."

Tony eyed him. The crankiness was something he definitely remembered from being a teen. "Uh-huh. Well, let me know if you figure out how to take compliments without trying to kill people."

Loki scoffed. "I'm sure you have so many to give."

"You're the first person to throw me out a window, you can have that one."

That got him a twitch of lips that might've almost been a smile. "You will not let go of that."

"It was very traumatising," Tony agreed. "You didn't even let me finish my drink."

"You haven't made good on your offer."

Tony hooked a finger into his sunglasses and looked at him over them. "Right, right, I said that. I'm sorry. I didn't know you were underage. Next time get a fake ID."

Loki's face was priceless.

Tony took a picture.

"You --" His eyes narrowed, and he stepped forward. Tony inwardly cheered. A Loki distracted from how badly he'd fucked up was a Loki less bent on murdering everyone that could've seen the fuck up. And he was convinced now that yeah, it was a fuck up. The kid was way too eager for distraction for it not to be. "What is that?"

"This is, uh ... well, I call it a phone because 'toy of how fucking awesome I am' is too long. Phones wish they were this awesome. It's more like a miniature everything. And it has Jarvis. Say hi to Loki, Jarvis."

"Good evening, sir."

So Loki was capable of actual curiosity above and beyond embarrassed don't-see-the-kid-behind-the-god. Who knew? It was a good look, actually. "You're adorable when you pretend to be polite, Jarvis. He's my AI. I made him. These days he sort of -- he's a bossy little shit, but he's my bossy little shit. Don't let the accent fool you."

"You created him?"

"Uh-huh." Tony made a face. "I needed a butler, so ..."

Loki flashed a grin, shaking his head. "You invent a replica of Heimdall and call it a butler. Mortals."

"What else? Seriously, my butlers growing up, they were amazing. They always knew when I was getting in trouble. Soooo many eyes in the backs of their heads. Or, you know, my dad gave them camera access, he liked keeping cameras on me. I started getting around them when I was five, though. I tried to build a robot that would imitate me but it only worked for like three days, so that was a total loss. And I'm babbling, I'm boring you, aren't I, I'm totally boring you."
Loki tilted his head and bent to touch the freeze-frame of his horror-face, brow wrinkling when his fingers went through. "Change it," he demanded.

"Ask Jarvis and ask nicely," he sing-songed.

"Jarvis," and wow, he actually sounded more respectful of a machine than he had with anybody alive, ever. "Please change your projection."

"Of course, sir."

It turned into a picture of sunflowers.

"Oh, God, Jarvis, you're betraying me. You're leaving me for another man, this is terrible. And you just like that he calls you sir," Tony accused.

"It is refreshing," Loki said, and wow, that actually sounded honest. "Your Captain. He will recover?"

"Oh, yeah. Serum, you know. Heals fast, no scars really. He'll just be reaaaally uncomfortable for a while. So, total accident, or ... you made it look like an accident because you're actually really fucking mean? If I were you, I'd go with option a."

Loki shook his head. "If I had meant to kill him, I would have."

"That's really creepy, and also not actually an answer." Tony glared over his sunglasses. "Do I have to make Jarvis ask? I totally will. Jarviiiiiiis."

"Sir, I recommend honesty in this case."

"Demanding honesty of a god of lies is doomed to fail."

"All the time, though? And, you know, your life kind of depends on not lying -- whoa whoa, not a threat, just saying, I don't think Asgard is gonna throw you a picnic."

"There are no such events on Asgard."

"Now that is just too sad. We'll have one on my roof or something. How is that possible? Jesus. Anyway, I'll schedule it for sometime. No windows!"

"You are obsessed."

He held up a finger. "I'm safety-conscious."

"I did not intend to hurt him, though you will not believe me regardless what I say."

That was ... way more serious, and way sooner, than Tony was expecting, and he considered Loki's uncomfortable nail-picking. Was he shuffling a little? No, it was just his toes playing with the hem of his pants. Someone had to replace those.

"I believe you," Tony said. "Steve's too good for this world, yeah, and god, when he gets a bug up his butt he's intolerable, but between you and me? I like him too."

"I do not --"

"Liar, liar, pants on fire. Come on. Not liking Steve is like killing puppies. Reincarnated baby Jesus puppies."
"And I of course should be put off by the prospect of killing the idol of a religion that deemed itself suitable to replace me."

Tony paused. "Uh ... okay. Yeah. Hold that thought, you know what, scratch it. I need better metaphors. Anyway, you totally like Steve and you don't want him to die, right?"

Loki was scowling ferociously. "No."

"Liar!" Tony sing-songed. "Come on, you're smiling, that was a twitch, come on, smile. You're not gonna get pregnant off eating his blood, right? 'cause that would just be awkward."

"Of course. This is a wonderful time to be pregnant with the child of one of my enemies. It will be a time of great celebration --"

"You're totally joining up in this scenario, right?"

"-- followed by becoming part of the Avengers and raising the child with all the love and attention given to a --"

"-- tiger! No, wait, liger, totally liger --"

"-- very ugly potted plant. It will be named Quim."

"Mini-Thor. I vote Mini-Thor."

"I will train it to cry at the sight of you."

Tony laughed outright. "Oh, sweetie, everyone cries at the sight of me eventually. You should see Fury. I swear there's been single tears. Very dramatic. Babies? No problem. I can get a whole class of them bawling in like ten seconds. Anyway, I don't think babies care about timing. It just ... happens, I don't know, I don't have ovaries." He slouched extravagantly in the chair. "You and Thor get really elaborate when you want to be mean. Where's that from?"

"Our mother," Loki said eventually, not without giving Tony a narrow look. Sure, diss his technique. If Tony couldn't bother Loki into cooling down a bit, nobody could. It was working, wasn't it? "The All-Father is of few words, and deliberates them. Once his temper is settled, so is the matter. All-Mother's vengeance is not at all swift."

Tony considered. "I have so many yo momma jokes I can't pick just one."

"Do not insult her," very soft, and Loki was in his face and, yeah, okay, bad plan, very bad plan.

He shoved at Loki's chest anyway, because he was hilariously suicidal, of course, let's push around angry gods, why not. "Hey, hey, back off, fishbreath. I wasn't going to. Okay, fine, I was, but I won't, okay? Okay?"

Tony wasn't sure who was more surprised when Loki did back off -- Tony for still having a hand attached, or Loki for not cutting it off. "You have an intemperate tongue."

"That's me." He spread his hands. "Intemperate. Sounds kind of dirty, doesn't it? Inteeeeemperaaaate."

Loki half-turned. He was totally hiding a smile. "I believe you hold me underage?"

Tony groaned and facepalmed. "Fine. Fine, you can have a drink. Just -- I won't mention it if you don't. Especially not to Steve."
"It would never occur to me."

Tony took off the sunglasses and folded them, fiddling with them for something to do that wouldn't interfere with Loki staring creepily at his phone. Tony sort of wanted to tell them to get a room, but his tech, and no. Just no. Jarvis was his baby. "So, I'm curious. What are you gonna do?"

Loki shrugged. "What I must."

"No, no, don't go all lone ranger on me. Come on. Level a bit, let's be serious, I can be serious for like five minutes. Well, I mean, I can, but I never am, so go ahead and feel special. Planning to go back to Asgard now?"

"Thor will insist. Refusing him is unwise." Loki started pacing in an awkward oval, pants brushing Tony's feet every time he passed. Seriously, they had to replace those. And get him another shower. Tony rolled his eyes. "Please. I've told him to go fuck himself, like ... three times today? He won't kill me. He just needs to grow the fuck up."

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Loki whirled on him, and if Tony had to guess, he was angry. "You underestimate him and overestimate me. Do you plan to make this a habit?"

"You don't get how this works. Sure, he can throw the hammer at me and kill me if I goad him enough. I kind of expect him to try at some point, actually, 'cause I'm just that annoying and this time I have plenty of reasons to be annoying, so I'll go the mile. Thing is, soon as he does, he loses. He's smart enough to know that. No hammer, he doesn't lose and maybe he wins. Hammer, he definitely loses. So no hammer."

"You fancy yourself in deadlock with Thor?"

"I'm amazing." He spread his arms. "I'm so glad you recognise that. Thank you. It means so much."


"Sure you could. But, you know, logic. Kind of universal. Kill me and you lose too." He waved a meaningful hand at the guards, who were definitely, definitely listening.

"I have nothing to lose," snarling into Tony's face, and seriously, did he ever brush his teeth? Wait, they hadn't given him a toothbrush, their bad. Bad SHIELD.

Tony pointed to the floor and to the screen showing a snoozing and completely oblivious child he would never, ever understand even existing. "Yeah, you do."

Loki went white and soundless with rage. "You dare."

"Stating a fact," Tony said, equable even though he was this close to shitting his pants. "Do you really think they'd let you keep that if you killed me? Come on. I know you're not stupid."

He whirled away, pacing angrily, chains clinking as he worked them in his hands.

Okay, so pants-shitting was temporarily off the menu. Tony could work with that. "You won't get it in Asgard either."

Loki had his back to him. "He will try to take me."

"You let us worry about that. Cuddle your kid, take a nap, I'll get somebody to take you some more
of that soup stuff. It's not your problem. Stop worrying."

"I am not worried for you!"

Tony rolled his eyes. "Pretty sure I didn't say that. Yeah, no, that's totally not what I said." Loki hissed. "No, I didn't. I meant more, you know, letting us handle it. You want to pretend you're stuck in here? I don't know why you are, but it's obvious you probably could just walk out of here even if you'd end up falling on your face and making us come find you."

"I would not."

"Would so. Maybe you're staying for the kid, maybe it's something else, but as long as you do, you're a guest of SHIELD, the Avengers, and mostly importantly me. I'm a big deal. Have a little faith. I know it's hard, but trust me, it's totally worth it. I'll make it good."

Loki looked like he wanted to kill him, and maybe stuff him and mount him on a wall for the entertainment value. "Should you still be saying that?"

"You have a dirty mind." Tony pointed and got up from the chair, picking up the forgotten sketchbook and flipping through it. "Huh, these aren't bad. This one even looks kinda like you. Anyway, I'll, actually, you know what, mind hanging onto this for Capsicle for me? I'll just lose it."

He took it, but very suspiciously. It was all in the fingers.

Tony cheerfully ignored it and picked up the thermos. "Thanks. See ya. Remember, no breaking out. I'll find you and pee on your sad, fallen corpse for wasting my time."

"You will not." Loki sounded absolutely scandalised.

"Baby, you have no idea how much my time is worth." He put his sunglasses back on and wagged his eyebrows, dragging the chair back to the door. "Oh, sorry, you're underage, I guess you wouldn't know. Whoops!"

"You won't succeed," absolute certainty that stopped him just as the door closed behind him. "Thor will not allow it."

"You're pretty certain for someone who thinks he doesn't want you."

Loki smiled without humour. "It is not my place to object."

"Please, the martyr thing, it's seriously on the nose. Like that shit stops you."

Tony dragged the chair to sit against the railing, squaring it off, and stepped back with a satisfied nod.

"Anyway. Take a nap and don't slice anybody, I'm gonna be busy. There's a certain council that needs a little introduction to Tony Fucking Stark, and I know just who to do it. See ya."
Chapter 21

They'd just got Thor calmed down from flipping tables when Stark swanned by in a freshly-pressed suit, his grin broad and bloodthirsty as a new recruit still enjoying the kill. "You're not authorised," Hill began, and Natasha saw Clint and Thor turn to see what was going on.

"Ladies." His cheer was poisonous as he passed them and marched into the hallway where Fury was arguing with the council. "Hi!" sing-song and bright and lethal in a way she personally recognised.

The door shut behind him.

Natasha turned to Hill, saw the expression on her face, and decided to act very quickly. She pressed Hill's shoulder until she sat down in her chair, produced a flask of Stolichnaya and a shotglass, filled it, and set it down in front of Hill precisely in the centre of her desk. Then she patted her shoulder, the only other expression of sympathy she could afford, and made her escape from the helpless building fury that was making Maria's hands tremble where she had them flat on the tabletop. "We're going now."

Hill pulled the glass toward her, licking her lips and taking a deep breath. "That's a very good idea."

"Coulson's office," she told both of them, and led the way.

"What is Tony doing?" Thor said, very confused behind her. "He is not to speak to his elders, correct?"

"Stark pays attention to the rules only when he wants to."

"Director Fury allows it?"

Natasha pushed open Coulson's door and flipped the lights. "He pretends Stark listens to him and Stark pretends to listen. It's not a typical government setup. Sit."

Thor took the seat in front of Coulson's desk, looking pleasantly surprised when it was comfortable.

"I don't see why I have to deal with this again," Clint groused behind her, setting out glasses for all three of them and pouring generously of Coulson's beloved whisky. One he pushed at Thor, the other he took for himself. The third he left empty, and she filled it with the rest of her flask.

"Either you're watching from the ceiling or you're watching from the ground. Does it make a difference?"

"I'd feel better." He took a sip, grimaced, and shuffled to lean against a filing cabinet. "So. Thor."

He had the glass in his hand; it looked ridiculously small, and though he made a face at the taste, he didn't put it down. "I will not ... flip tables. I did not mean to offend."

"Do you do that at home a lot?" Clint said. "I mean, do you just ... grab a table and flip?"

"Sometimes," Thor said. "Is it irreplaceable, what I have destroyed?"

Natasha wasn't in the business of pulling punches. "Some of it. You did a lot of damage."

"I am sorry. I will not again. I only do not understand why you persist in protecting my brother. He will wrong you, he has wronged you. Even now Steve is grievously hurt. Why will you not
understand? It is not safe that he remains."

Clint swirled his glass. "The problem is that we don't know if it's safe for him back there. You've all punished him before, and it hasn't worked. You sewed up his mouth, right? That's extreme, even for us. If pain and humiliation was going to work it would have already."

Thor stared into his glass, shoulders slumped. "I had my reasons for that. It was hurt him, or have him killed, and I could not bear it. It hurt me, to injure him so. But far better that than leaving him."

Natasha pursed her lips. "Returning with the Tesseract and letting us supervise him while you talk to your father isn't going to be the same. The choice isn't the same."

"It feels as though it is. And in truth, I am ..." Thor swallowed hard; to her, he was guilty, and ashamed, and very desperate. "I do regret."

"That's good, but it's not the problem right now. Are you sure Asgard law doesn't have loopholes for one of your people attacking another realm? A right to punishment? From what you've said he didn't do anything to Asgard, only us and Jotunheim, which he destroyed. Is there anyone on Jotunheim to hold him accountable?"

Thor's face shadowed. "Likely not. The destruction was very great."

"That leaves us as the wronged party. Is there no precedent at all?"

Natasha sipped in the silence, and Clint pressed his glass to hers, fingers warm, and hauled himself up to sit on the cabinet overlooking the table, brushing dust off his hands.

She waved it out of her face and he toasted her again.

"There is," Thor said, and the loudness of his voice was too big for the office, for Coulson's plant in a terracotta pot and the emptiness of his desk.

"We don't have to use it," Clint said. "But it'd help if we knew what there was."

"As I said, there is one. But it is the exchange of property, of value equivalent to that which was destroyed. And I cannot -- I could speak to my father, indeed. Perhaps I could persuade him. There are -- arguments, given his heritage. I do not like them, but they could be made."

Thor sighed, voice lowering to a rumble that wobbled.

"I do not fear the All-Father's censure; I have been banished once for my temper, and that was enough. But I fear he will agree. I fear, very much, his pleasure."

Natasha reached under the table, pulled out one of Coulson's handkerchiefs, and offered it. Thor took it, apologising, and blew his nose, forgetting to fold it.

"I am an unworthy son, I fear. But I do love my brother, for good or ill, and I believe our father cares for him still. And yet. I will not offer this explanation, Romanova, Clint. I will not."

"You don't have to," Clint said, sounding expressly uncomfortable. "Seriously, we're just establishing some facts here. Telling us about something doesn't mean you have to do it."

"Our word is binding," Thor said.

Natasha considered. That made much, much more sense. If communication was barter, and the subject something that could or would be carried out ... Ah, possibilities. Ah, of course. Telling the
truth gave choice of possibilities. Lying took away those choices. Of course. She had an idea. "If we ask you questions and you reply with questions, does that bind you?"

"I really like you," Clint said to her.

Thor sighed. "No. I do not think so."

"I'll start, then." Natasha took another sip and let it warm her. "Is it possible for you to lie?"

"Am I Loki?"

"So that's a no. But you can deceive?"

Thor considered a moment. "Did you know there was a butterfly in your hair?" She checked, and Clint laughed. Thor was smiling a little, obviously warming to the game. "Will my brother be killed if he remains?"

"Is Stark likely to let people he's fond of get hurt?"

Thor inclined his head, obviously processing the idea. She didn't hold her breath, but it was a near thing. "Tony holds much power, then?"

"Do you have someone who has absolute power but refuses to use it unless it's necessary?"

"Do you lack a gatekeeper?"

Clint was grinning at her. "So, Thor, do you think Loki's evil?"

That took longer. "Do you have disturbances of the mind on Midgard?"

"Do you seriously think sane people get called Hawkeye?"

That took a long time, much longer, and Natasha sipped quietly as Thor frowned over something or other, tracing the rim of his glass with a finger.

"Do you find me very stupid for loving my father as I do?"

Natasha took that one. "Have you ever heard a child refuse to believe the best of their parents?"

He shook his head. "You think me a child?"

"I think you're young," Clint said. "And you've watched what happens to people who disagree with your father your entire life and you thought if you did everything right he'd listen to you because you deserved it, not because you were lucky enough not to step out of line."

"That is not a question."

Clint shrugged. "Wasn't meant to be. It was an observation. Call it personal experience. Try this one. Did anyone expect he'd banish you?"

"No?" Thor looked genuinely uncertain. "It was not -- I did not -- I did not deserve it, I think. Perhaps I did, but not -- is this always so very complicated?"

"Most of the time," Natasha said. "Are you all right with trusting us with all of this?"

"What she means is, are you going to kill us later for knowing this stuff?"
Tony challenged me to trust, and I am trying. Is this not proof enough?"

"It is," Natasha said, and quirked a smile. "Clint had similar trouble convincing me."

"It was a different situation. I recruited her to SHIELD," Clint said to Thor. "But yeah, there was a lot of complicated stuff in there."

She didn't want to talk about her complicated stuff. It wasn't relevant at the moment. "Has your father always been right?"

"Yes." Sure and unquestioning. "His wisdom is absolute. That we do not understand it at first is a sign of his greatness. Is it wrong that I did not always agree in my youth?"

"Is it wrong that you don't agree with him right now?"

Thor blew out a breath. "Yes. No. I am not sure. It is as if to admit doubt is to betray him. I have betrayed him before, and caused great war and suffering for acting upon my doubt -- that was the reason of my banishment -- but to doubt again is as if I have cleaved myself in twain. Do you understand?"

"Who are you worried about here? Loki, Earth, us, or you?" Clint swilled whiskey in his mouth; she hated it when he did that and he knew it.

"Can I not be concerned for all?"

"Do you want your head to explode?"

Thor twitched a tiny smile at him. "Would it not be simpler?"

"Are you serious?" she asked, careful to be blunt.

"It would be easier. That is not deceit. Do I wish for ease? At times. Particularly of late. If this were a battle my role would be clear and a comfort. Instead it is my brother and my father, and I find forging a position between to be ..." He shook his head. "I do not wish to turn upon either. Do you think I do not know my place?"

"You're gonna have to choose, buddy. Sure, you could go on keeping quiet for the rest of your life, but don't kid yourself. There's nothing neutral about it."

"I have abstained from their discussions."

Natasha set down her glass. "What did Loki think of that?"

"They are my family," agitated again, and Clint leaned down, waving a hand to take Thor's attention off the desk. He was already crumpling the edge.

"We know. Really. We know. That's why we're having this conversation, right? But there's two questions right now. One, are you going to fight through the entire base to grab Loki for something even Cap says was an accident? Two, are you going to be able to come back?"

"The Tesseract... the treasuries are not barred to me, and its power cannot overwhelm me. I must have your word. You will not let Loki free. If you are to continue with your shield," it was obvious he still hated the idea, "and you place him within it, and Heimdall cannot see, you must watch for treachery, and you must not trust. Asgard may not be able to give the aid you require. Do not place him within unless you must. Is that clear?"
"And if we take that into account?"

He looked very, very weary. "I will return with the Tesseract."

"That's all we want," Clint said.

"No," broken with grief, and Thor wadded the handkerchief and pressed it to his eyes with a fist, jaw trembling beneath a dangling, monogrammed corner. "You ask so much more than that."
Bruce still hated his life, and Thor, and Loki, and the entire situation that delayed him from getting out like he'd planned to. He was supposed to be long gone by now, and definitely not in a position to get dragged into a questionable fondness for the crazy, crazy volatile team that did things like poke hippos and poke Bruce and tell him to suit up when the other guy was the furthest thing from a suit possible.

Yeah. Questionable fondness was a good phrase, he liked it. It was the only way to describe Tony sometimes (shawarma, god, it wasn't even open and they'd had to sit on Tony to stop him from calling the manager and raising a stink) and the rest of the Avengers -- time-bomb was still a good description.

Really, he should be on the other side of the world. Not nearly far enough, but if things blew he might avoid some of the fallout. Maybe a nice warzone. Only safe place to be.

But he went to babysit anyway. In a weird way it almost counted.

Loki was turned away from the door, scribbling into a notepad that Steve probably left behind earlier, and the floor being clean only highlighted how dirty the back of Loki's neck was.

"Hey there."

That got him an annoyed flick of his wrist. "Shh."

Bruce rolled his eyes and went to talk to the lead guard, a pretty woman that reminded him of first meeting Natasha, something in the way she held herself. Everyone in SHIELD was absurdly lethal. Even the geophysicist was gun-certified.

Turned out they had shower facilities specifically for high-risk prisoners, and yes, it was available and so were the eight (eight) specialised guards needed, they just needed a minute to prepare.

Bruce went to stare over Loki's shoulder. Turned out he was drawing. What it was he had no idea -- it was either incredibly surreal art or a new form of mathematics. It actually looked like what Selvig showed them given enough time to refine and develop proper notation.

Loki was rolling it up now, running a thumbnail across the top and tearing it off, and the page underneath was getting cannibalised for something, more nail work and tearing, and Bruce realised Loki was making endcaps and tying them onto the paper.

"You will take this to Selvig," he said when he got up.

"I will?" Bruce gave him a doubtful look. "Uh, why?"

"You will need it." Loki frowned at him. "The time will come, and you will understand. For now -- deliver it to Selvig, and no other. He must not allow it to leave his grasp."
He held it out.

Bruce sighed. "I'm guessing this is non-negotiable. And I'm not allowed to look in it before he opens it."

A nod.

"If I do that, you'll cooperate? Uh, those nails of yours need trimming, I was gonna do it today."

A long pause, mostly taken up by staring at his hands, then another nod. "Yes."

"Okay. Good. Step back a bit." He leaned in the door and took it. "Uh, thanks. I'll run this over. Watch him," to the head guard, who nodded her gun already ready her gun.

Bruce would've been more nervous about the paper if Loki had smiled even a little through the whole exchange. He hadn't.

"What is this?" Selvig looked baffled. "Origami?"

"Loki's present. Or something. Uh, I wasn't exactly asking. He had a pencil."

Selvig eyed him. "Huh. You said it looked like my work?"

"Neater. Fewer annotations of the 'if edge case, I have no idea' sort. Whether that means, uh, no edge cases ..."

"Then it's worth investigating. I'll take a look," he said. "Don't you need to be getting back?"

Bruce lingered a moment. "You're not worried?"

Selvig glanced up from untangling one of the ends. "I remember working with him. I did most of the calculations, but it was his direction that made any of it work. He's smart. If he thinks I need to know something, I'll take a look. I won't promise I like it, but I'll see what it is."

"Fair enough. Tell me about it when I get back?"

"Of course. You're the expert on gamma radiation, Doctor Banner. We'll crack it." Bruce took his cue and left, warmed a little despite himself.

Loki was standing exactly in the same point, hands folded behind his back, and four guards were standing in file around the door.

"So how does this work?" he said to them. "Do I just open it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay." Bruce wasn't really surprised when Loki easily took place in the middle of the guards, moving with them like he'd been doing it all his life. Maybe he had. Did they have royal escorts on Asgard?

Yeah, Barton had warned him, but it was a surprise to discover Loki really wasn't shy. At all.

Bruce occupied himself with thinking over safe handling of the Tesseract when they did the handover and kept his eyes averted. Seeing the inside of his body, the structure of his bones, their breaks and history and youth, felt like violation enough already.
He'd taken another look, taking into account everything they'd found out. Somewhere between fourteen to seventeen, emphasis on the lower end as being most likely, was his new best guess. Some parts were overdeveloped, unusually dense, and some were light enough that if he was human he'd have been concerned about early-onset osteoporosis -- a lack of some crucial nutrient where its natural deposits ought to have been, maybe, though what, he had no idea. His bloodwork was like nothing Bruce had ever seen.

But even with all of that, there was nothing natural about most of the breaks he'd found -- they were in places that were almost impossible or extremely risky to self-inflict, and consistent with ... he wanted to say something between the rack and a Catherine wheel, as though he'd been bent backwards over something at full stress for a long time, long enough that two of the vertebra just over the small of his back had compression fractures.

What was there otherwise made sense for a lifelong dancer, wrists and knees repeatedly sprained, most of his toes broken where they met the ball of his foot and spreading flat.

Thor's x-rays were dramatically, dramatically different. They showed a young man in the prime of health, with few or no signs of torture, and most specifically a soldier who'd already put in at least ten years of active duty with a heavy one-handed weapon. It was in the lopsided build of his shoulders and the width of his feet, long-healed stress fractures in his shoulders and shins.

Whatever alterations there were to a basic musculoskeletal frame were of activity and battle, his off-arm broken multiple times in defensive wounds along the radius and ulna, the ankle and knee of that side thickened and showing a slight list inward, probably from how he distributed his weight to his back foot to account for Mjolnir's. Both hands had multiple boxer's fractures, and some sort of edged weapon had scored six of his ribs deeply enough that a sufficiently hard hit would break them completely, the bones only halfway through plating themselves together.

Neither of them showed an easy life, and Bruce was under no illusion that Loki could've shown a perfectly human structure if he cared to. But he hadn't. This was what he'd kept. If that was what Asgard was like when it was at peace, if that was what it did to its undoubtedly precious heirs, how much worse was it in wartime?

Or were they both always expendable?

"You are bothered," Loki said, low and crisp and startling Bruce out of his thoughts. He was dressed in black and green, wet hair curling at his neck and short-sleeved shirt showing the slope of muscle over his forearms and the swell beneath his wrist, the comparative fragility of his fingers.

It was too easy to compare him against the x-rays.

"Yeah, uh, you're way too thin," Bruce said, forgetting to even try to be polite. "We're not feeding you enough, are we?"

"It is sufficient."

"Doesn't mean it's enough." He bent to tap the panel on the wall, gesturing to the chair that rose out of the floor. "Take a seat."

Loki muttered to himself and sat down, clenching the armrests as straps locked over his body.

"Sorry, just a precaution. I don't feel like bringing out the other guy right now. So, so ... uh, I'm just gonna dry off your hair first. Last thing we need is you getting a chill or something."

Loki smiled like that was funny, but bent his head anyway and Bruce didn't ask.
It was weird, doing this for a god. The last time he'd done it had been with a colleague's kid that she'd brought in during grad school, colouring first-year chem diagrams in his office and getting into the decontamination shower when he wasn't looking. He'd been disturbed by the vulnerability of the bared nape of her neck and now he was disturbed by Loki's. It was just too much too close to the surface.

"You are still troubled."

It was even weirder that Loki was prompting him to talk about his feelings, and Bruce was immediately suspicious. "Yeah, half of it's your fault. You really know how to get at a guy."

"It was very easy."

Yeah, Bruce wasn't touching that one, not with that smirk.

"What I don't get," squeezing water out of the ends of his hair, "is why you picked me. You didn't do the illusion thing to anybody else, so am I just special or something?"

A shrug, or what there was of one with the straps over his shoulders. "You pretend to be a man. Yet your fear of the beast is in every breath you take."

"So I'm special. That's ... that's great. I'm honoured. How's that special?"

Loki sounded wistful. "That you pretend. It is a luxury."

Bruce snorted. "Because you hate luxuries, Mister my-shirts-are-handspun-silk. Right. How is that a luxury? Like, I don't ... I don't get this conversation. Does this have something to do with your bone scans?"

Loki tipped his head back, meeting his eyes. "What is it you think you see?" soft and dangerous.

"A kid," Bruce said, and pushed at his head, giving his hair a final once-over. "You've been hurt pretty bad. And your skeletal structure is just a bit different from Thor's. Or, you know, a lot. But humanoid, just ... different."

"So your mortal machines are capable of that," and when Bruce put the towel in the sink and circled around, Loki had his eyes closed. "Yes. We are different."

He picked up the laser Tony gave him. It was a weird thing, with a fat handle and needle-like tip, a little metal guard around it, probably so he didn't end up cutting through Loki's finger. Normal nail clippers just wouldn't work. But it only had a distance of a few millimeters, so he wouldn't cut his own head off either. Forward planning for the win. "How different?"

Loki opened his eyes and tilted his head to watch Bruce pick up a finger, bringing the laser to press against the underside of his fingernail, a smell like lollies left out in the sun too long. "I am adopted."

"Yeah, he said that." It was tricky to do, and he had to give it several passes before he figured out how to make a clean cut from one side to the other. It did blunt his nails really well, though; brushing his thumb over the edge barely cut. "Lots of people are."

"Not like me." There was half a smile there. "There are no men like me. Not now."

Bruce glanced up at him, bending a little to see the laser better. "That sounds pretty ominous."

Loki shrugged with the shoulder that wasn't attached to the hand Bruce was holding, and Bruce
actually kinda appreciated it. "So should it be, to mark a realm's death."

Seriously?

Bruce stared.

Loki lifted an eyebrow, ungodly amused.

"That's ... uh, that's ... pretty extreme. You couldn't have just sent a fuck-you letter or something?"

Loki scoffed. "That was the letter."

"Right," unconvincing. Three fingers down, too many to go, plus toenails. Bruce wasn't looking forward to the toenails. "So you're not from Asgard?"

"No." He was looking at Bruce's hands again, contemplative like he was dissecting everything about the laser to reproduce it later. Or marking every time Bruce touched him for some kind of revenge. Either way. Maybe both. "I am Jotun."

Bruce made an I-don't-know face. "What's that?"

That made Loki laugh, which was just unexpected.

"What? It's just a question."

"An ignorant one," settling. "They are frost giants. The name is descriptive."

"So I didn't actually have to do your hair."

"No."

Bruce sighed. One more nail down. At least they both had steady hands, so it wasn't as bad as it could've been. "Figures. That's -- you know what, whatever. I'm calling it a gain. You know, on whatever cosmic tally's going on right now."

Loki shook his head. "You and my brother both believe in such a thing, and yet you do not like him."

"That obvious, huh?" Bruce shrugged. "Uh, I just have ... bad memories of school. Uh, I was picked on a lot, by guys like him. Life was pretty crap, which they could've figured out of they'd taken about, you know, two seconds, or looked at my shoes even, but, uh, they didn't care. So, you know, he reminds me of them. It's kind of irrational."

"Very."

"Well, yeah. But I never claimed I was completely rational. I'm the last person to -- I mean, look at the other guy. Rationality kinda flies out the window when you turn into a giant green rage monster."

"You hate the beast," like he was testing a theory.

Bruce had to stop on the fifth finger to chuckle. "No, not that special. I, I, actually, I just hate myself. Not enough to blow up a whole planet, though, which, you know, it's, it's impressive. But in general."

Loki raised an eyebrow. "Jotun are a race of monsters. Cowardly, untrustworthy, deficient in all that is right and honourable. They lie and feel nothing. To treat with them for the greater good is
acceptable so long as they have impetus to obey. Why should I not destroy such a realm?"

"You know, uh, you're not convincing me my 'president of the self-loathing club' theory is all that wrong yet."

He switched to the other hand, leaning against the sink.

Loki was still watching him. "Would you not destroy the beast? So mindless. So murderous."

Bruce hesitated. "I don't know. I used to think if there was a pill or something I could take to get rid of it, it'd all go away and I could go back to being, you know, I -- I had an office. I liked my office. It was nice. I used to dream that all of this was a nightmare, and waking up -- I kind of have a minor in suicide now. The exams were hell." He chuckled to himself.

It was getting easier and easier to do his nails now, fever passes to take out the edges he'd missed at either side. The trick was to curve it just a little, and the last two blunted easily. "Okay, feet now."

He bent to the panel, releasing one foot from ankle to knee, and propped it up on the inside of his thigh. Loki had ridiculously long toes, which he figured from the xrays already, but really, they were ridiculous.

"Go on."

"Okay. So. Yeah, you're right, I'm not done. Uh. Tony's -- you know, he's Tony. But he's also ..." He tried to find the words. "When we were fighting your army, he told me to suit up. Like it was something I could put on and use, not -- you know, ignore it and then explode everywhere and hate myself afterward. It was really annoying he did that. I thought it was annoying. But it ... I've seen the footage, some of it. The other guy? He's a giant green rage monster. That's -- that's kind of undeniable. But he's not mindless. And I don't think he's any angrier than I am."

Bruce brushed clippings off his leg and squeezed the next toe. "I mean, I'd probably still take the pill to make him go away. But I'd have to think about it first. It's something. It's -- I think it's a good direction."

Loki was inspecting him, eyes moving very slowly over his face like he was memorising everything.

"What?"

"You are far too sentimental."

"Giant green rage monster," Bruce said. "That's sentiment for you."

This time when he finished and unbound the other foot Loki put it up without prompting, still watching his hands and face with the look of someone very, very thoughtful.

Bruce could only hope all that thinking came to something good.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Discussion of trauma, dubious medical consent, familial viciousness.

Thanks again for the comments and kudos! You've all been so incredible. :) 

Something was shaking. "Huh?"

But he couldn't move his mouth, and he blinked and squinted and tried to see past the hands covering his eyes. He protested. "Shh, shh, just the lights are gonna blind you, Cap. Give it a minute. You awake? Don't talk. Squeeze my hand if you are."

He hadn't noticed his hand was touching anything, but now he could tell it was warm. Whatever they'd given him, it was powerful, and his grip felt weak. "'Kay, then. How do you feel about being a experimentation subject?"

Cap wasn't sure if to frown or scold or both, but he couldn't make his face work, and he squeezed him harder instead and tried to glare.

"Ow, ow, ow, stop that, stop that, I need my hand!"

He relaxed, trying to apologise, but his mouth wouldn't work either. "Nh."

"Seriously, don't try to talk. It's just, Loki. You remember Loki?"

Steve squeezed.

"Right. You wanna see if he'll heal you? Because he's so very sorry, and he wants research hours. You won't even remember I said all this, will you? Nah, you won't, look at you." He frowned in confusion under his hand. "Oh. Right. Talking too fast. Are you okay with me wheeling you down to Loki's cell to get him to heal you? One of these nurses would come along, I bet."

"Ghn," Steve tried to tell him, concerned. "Bh,"

"You're worried about the guards?" Squeeze. "They'll be there too. Stark's refined his tranqs, too. The kid's going down if he tries anything. Won't be pretty, but it'll work. And you're the only one of us hardy enough to survive whatever he might try to do. But without it -- still listening?" Squeeze.

"Right. But without him proving it was an accident, we can't convince Fury. Kind of need you on this, Cap."

He squeezed, and nodded under his fingers as best as he could, and he heard Clint sigh. "Go back to sleep, Cap. Your hands are freezing, want a heat pack?"

He squeezed, and soon his hands were laid down on something crinkly and warm, and he clutched it. It was nice to be cared for again, a little. Agent Barton kind of reminded him of his mum. Steve didn't try to open his eyes.

"Go back to sleep. And seriously, stop calling me Agent Barton. Clint's fine."
"Cnt," he managed.

Uproarious laughter followed him into sleep.

Of the faces he'd expected to see when he woke up again, Loki's, serious and frowning, was very far down the list. The ceiling looked familiar, but it wasn't the infirmary.

"Hi," Clint said, leaning into his field of vision from the other side of the bed. He vaguely remembered questions and hands, and he fumbled. The warm plastic was still there. So it had happened. "He asked to see you. I made an executive decision, but I'm full of those lately. How you doing, Cap?"

Steve tried to smile, but the ribboned flesh of his cheek shifted against his teeth and sagged. It was good to be aware of himself again. "Whumey?"

"I have no idea what you just said," Clint again, apologetic.

Loki was still staring at him, and Steve waved at his clothes. They were new. Different. "Nuh?"

"Doctor Banner provided them, as well as some interesting conversation. He cut my nails."

Well, they were very short now. That was good, Steve supposed, and he patted the offered hand. Loki squeezed back for a moment, then let go, no change in his expression. Steve wondered if he'd hallucinated it.

"Idiot," Loki told him, and Steve protested when the bandages were taken off, stitches shifting. "Hold him still."

Clint leaned over and grabbed his head. "Sorry, Cap. Trust exercise and you're the guinea pig."

Loki glared at that, then bent close. Steve tried to tell him how green his eyes were, but Clint's hand on his jaw wouldn't let him.

Something purple flashed at the corner of his eye.

-- ice --

-- ice --

-- ice --

-- he'd never been sleeping --

Steve panted against Clint's arms, wobbly and teary-eyed with pain aftershocks. The stitches were gone, the inside of his cheek smooth and whole to the touch of his tongue. It took a while to find words. The heat pad in his hands helped to ground him out of panic, smooth and so very, very warm.

"Why did you?"

Loki scowled. "That is my business."

Steve chuckled, swallowing painfully. "Well, thank you. Trust exercise?"

"Banner's idea," Clint said, coming around to loiter at the end of the bed. "If he wanted back in the lab, he'd have to heal you first. Also if he healed you without causing more damage."
Loki shrugged at Steve's confusion. "An easy bargain."

Steve studied him. "Does this have to do with Thor leaving?"

He ducked his head. "No," he muttered. "Not everything is about that oaf, much to his eternal disappointment."

"He and Banner had a bit of a heart-to-heart," Clint said. "I didn't really understand most of it, but hey, your face's okay. We kinda need you up and running for the handoff. There's a site a bit from here that Thor says might be good, but if we all turned out I'd feel better."

Steve swung his legs over the side, blinking as his balance recalibrated and he realised where he was. Loki's cell? How had Clint managed that? "And Tony?"

Clint looked sour. "He finally drove Fury to drinking in public. But at least Fury got his job back."

Well. That was definitely worth getting up for, and Steve wobbled a moment, steadying himself. "I'll go change. Mind keeping everyone out of trouble for a bit longer?"

"Stopping an alien bug army was an easier ask, Cap. I'll do my best." He gestured to Loki and the array of guards around Steve's bed fell into step.

"Where do I find Tony?"

"On the bridge. Fury's there too."

Steve cleared his throat. "Loki? Thank you."

That got him a nod and a quicksilver sliver of something that might've been a smile before the soldiers herded around him, Clint shaking his head and following. "You're playing with fire, Cap."

He knew, and turned to the nurse who came to check over his cheek, waiting him out until he was declared surprisingly well even for the serum's effects. Steve had an idea of who was responsible for that.

Said responsible person made no move to the door when it opened, and Steve glanced back when it closed between them. "Thank you."

Loki ducked his head and scoffed.

Fury and Tony arguing on the bridge was no great surprise. That Fury actually was drinking and Tony was practically dancing was harder to believe.

"Steve! Have a seat! It's my table. Oh, and my chair. Aren't you glad you have a table? Aren't tables great?"

He glanced between them. "What happened?"

Fury sighed. It sounded endless. "Stark gave the council an ultimatum."

"If they fired him I'd take all my toys and go home," Tony chirped. "I think they got the point when I started moving the desks. And the table. And the chairs. Did I mention the chair? I thought that was a nice touch."

Steve glanced down at the table. "This is yours?"
"Everything in this room came from Stark Industries. Special upgrades." He spun on his heel to grin at Fury. "God, it's hard to have a spy network when you don't have satellites anymore, isn't it? Tsk, tsk."

Fury glared. "This is your fault, Stark."

"Everything's my fault." Tony preened.

Steve couldn't help the shocked laughter. "You -- you threatened the council? Can you do that?"

"Stark Industries, babe." Tony waggled his sunglasses. "I'm a philanthropist."

Steve blinked, stunned and horrified as he started to understand. "Loki wasn't fighting for control of the world. He was fighting you for it."

He pointed. "You got it." His happiness started to fall into concern and Steve just couldn't stand it. "Steve? Hey, hey, what's up?"

"We fought to stop men like you."


"Maybe," Steve said. His throat hurt.

He'd never been asleep.

He'd been so good at forgetting.

And for what? It hadn't changed. Tony could boast about controlling the actions of SHIELD's council like it was nothing to blackmail people whose interest was supposed to be the good of the world for his own selfish reasons and get away with it.

"Steve, Steve, don't zone out on me." Warm hands pressed against his face, and he looked up into Tony's eyes, still angry but also worried. "What happened? Agent Romanova's the mean one. Second to me, of course, but don't tell her I said that. What's wrong with you? What did he do?"

"He woke me up," numb with -- with everything. "I don't -- maybe he didn't mean to."

"Well, you know, seventy years snoozing, it's been, what, a week --"

"I wasn't sleeping."

"Shit. Shit, Steve. Never, ever mention this again. Ever. When this is over it never ever happened," and Tony crushed him against his chest, the reactor hard and humming against his hair. "The hug thing. I don't do hugs. I'm allergic."

"I won't," Steve said, and clung, biting his lips shut until he thought he could talk without screaming. "I'm sorry. I was unfair."

"No, no, actually, you weren't. I'm not like you. I'm not a good guy. I've got a lot to make up for, Jesus do I, but being a goody-two-shoes just isn't in the genes."

Tony's chin was pointier than Steve would've expected, and the pressure against the top of his head was strangely comforting.

"I am... one of those guys." He blew a breath into Steve's hair; it was uncomfortable, almost ticklish.
"The worst thing about me, the thing I've got on HYDRA and Loki and everybody? I'm efficient. I made weapons, and they were the best weapons in the world. They killed thousands when other manufacturers were still stuck in the hundreds, you know? I know a little something about scaling up. And I don't make weapons anymore. But I'm still one of those guys, and I still don't know the first thing about being a good person. That's what I've got Pepper and Rhodey and, hell, you guys, and you for, even though you're totally a self-righteous prick. Okay?"

Steve had a suspicion he wasn't the only one on the bridge with watery eyes.

"Are we done? We're done, right?" so plaintive Steve pulled back with a laugh.

"Yeah. Yeah, we're done."

Tony cleared his throat and let go and put on his sunglasses, plucking at his jacket and shuddering dramatically. "I have hives, told you I was allergic. I need to go do something drastic and get my dignity back. Maybe I'll flash a senator or something. No, that's outdated, what else..."

"Thanks, Tony."

"Uh-uh! Allergic!" Tony whirled to point at Fury. "Never mention this ever and I'll only mock you a little for needing me to save your ass. I'll even refrain from writing it in the sky with my repulsors, that's generous, I think that's generous."

Fury sighed. "Stark."

"Yeah?" grin bright again.

"You saved my ass. Get out of my sight."

Tony giggled. "I'll treasure that recording for the rest of my life. Oh, Director Fury, you're so welcome, come to my arms, I'm running a hug service and you're totally invited, let me love you --"

"OUT."

Steve hooked fingers into the back of Tony's shirt. "Right away, sir."

"Steeeeevvee." He coughed and adjusted his tie when they were safely out of reach and Steve felt he could let go without Tony rabbiting back to bother Fury some more. "Seriously, let's never, ever talk about this. Goddamn embarrassing, I don't need this in my life."

"All right," Steve said agreeably.

Tony was giving him a suspicious look.

Steve smiled back. "You're not as bad as you think you are."

He rolled his eyes. "Blame Pepper, I always do. Right! Tesseract should be here like ... five minutes ago, let's get this party started. Go find Thor or something. Try not to let him start the I-just-wanna-say-goodbye song and dance, we don't need disembowelled gods in our lives if he gets in Loki's face. What'd he do to you, anyway?"

"He healed me. But I don't think it was just my face. It all -- the war and everything still hurts, it might always do. It all came back. But I think I might figure out how to live with it."

Tony considered him. "Hell of a gift."
"Yeah."

"He's really convinced he's going back there, isn't he?" He grumbled. "I get trust issues, but seriously, this is annoying."

Steve fidgeted. "Maybe he should be there when Thor goes?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's -- risky as hell, but if we just tell him Thor's gone he won't buy it. We can pin him if he freaks out, right?"

"Probably."


"Thanks," not sure if it was sarcastic, and he switched on his comm. "Anyone copy?"

"Agent Romanova. I copy. What do you need, Cap?"

"Ah, I'm looking for Thor, actually?"

"He's here. We're in Agent Coulson's office. If you go past the briefing room on your way down, there's vodka taped to the wall behind the green switchboard. Bring it with you."

That didn't bode well, and he dutifully tucked the bottle inside his jacket and knocked, unsure of what to expect.

Thor red-rimmed and tangle-haired in acute distress, Agent Romanova sitting on the desk and patting his arm, was not it.

Steve was a little alarmed, honestly.

"Am I interrupting?"

Thor shook his head and gestured him closer. "No, Steve. Thank you for bringing refreshments." He smiled, but it looked wrong. "Romanova reminds me of my friend the Lady Sif. She did ever refuse to flatter me needlessly."

"Nicely put," she said, and held out a hand for the bottle. On closer inspection she looked exhausted enough to have been dealing with Thor the entire time Steve was under.

She probably had been; who else was there?

Well, he was here now, and Steve dragged the other chair in the room closer to Thor, distracting him while she poured herself a glass. "Tony said the Tesseract should be here by now."

"So soon. Though more time will help no-one." Thor rubbed his wrist under his nose. "I know not what I will find in Asgard. It is ever strange without him near."

"Guys, half an hour and we're all set up. Be there or get smashed into a hexagon."

"Got it," Steve said, and turned it off. "Thor? Have you decided?"

Thor peered at him, hair falling in his face, and he swallowed several times before speaking.

Steve could guess what he wanted to say.
"Can I see him?"

Romanova raised an eyebrow at him; he nodded, and she touched her comm. "Lieutenant 590-Foxtrot, do you copy? Ask the prisoner if he wants a visit from his brother."

Steve watched her eyebrows pinch as she listened.

"Thanks, Lieutenant." She lowered her hand with a sigh. "You can, briefly, but not alone."

Thor glanced between them, already rising. "You will accompany me?"

"Yeah, of course."

Romanova caught him watching her drain the glass the rest of the way and glared. She set it down, putting the bottle under the desk. "Chop chop. Means we should hurry."

Loki was standing in the exact middle of the cell when they arrived, stiffly inclining his head. "Thor."

"Brother," still hoarse, and he stepped forward, Steve getting in front and angling a little. No sense in tempting fate. They'd spoken for barely three seconds and already the atmosphere was volatile.

"Where is your toy?" Loki lifted his chin. "Surely you do not plan to allow my defense."

Thor shook his head, and Steve wondered if Loki saw his grief, if he understood any of it. "Brother, no. You will not come with me. You have refused. Unless --?"

"No. You will force me or not at all."

"Then I --" His voice cracked. "I bid you leave, brother."

Loki looked wounded. Hurt, and snarling to cover it. Was being dragged back to Asgard some sort of twisted proof of Thor's affection?

Steve seriously doubted every family on Asgard was this troubled.

"Is this some pathetic attempt at chivalry? I am not one of your damsels despite the whispers of your damned friends."

Thor shifted. "We are family. I care for you, brother, though I know not now how well I have shown it --"

"Family." Loki was bright and cold, his contempt luminous. "Yes. You so care for family you have never once bothered to know the health of your nephew. Do you care he is healthy, he is safe, how he has grown from the laughing serpent you tore from my shoulders?"

"Brother --"

"Do you care that he is mine?"

Thor sounded pitying, and Steve saw Romanova come forward, alarmed. "Loki, your child he may be, but he remains a monster."

His lips quivered once and exactly once before he whirled and smashed a thermos against the wall between them, glass shattering and drops of soup trickling brown to the floor as he howled a sound of such fury Steve had never heard.
Such pain.

"Leave."

"Brother --"

"Odin's son."

Romanova led Thor away. "I suggest," Steve heard her say, low and even, "you don't speak to him for quite some time."

Steve stepped forward, helplessly watching Loki shake and hug himself so tightly Steve worried he'd break his own arms, drawing in shallow pants of breath.

His head snapped up when Steve knocked on the glass, wild eyes fixing on his.

"He's mine," a low, wretched keen as he sank to the floor, scrabbling at the screen and slapping it as he choked. "He's mine, he may be a monster but he's mine. He is mine, you will not have him."

"Loki --"

"Leave!"

There was no reason there, only fury and fear, and Steve backed off as he pressed his cheek to the screen and apologised to it in low, urgent whispers.

Steve couldn't leave him alone, not like this, but he could look away and hope it was enough.
Dealing with Thor right now was kind of painful for Clint. He was so -- god. Oblivious.

If filling him with arrows would've worked, Clint would've happily volunteered a few days ago. Hell, he wouldn't have even bothered volunteering, he'd have just done it.

But no, he had to talk. And Thor wanted to talk. And Clint hated it.

This wasn't his fucking job, damnit. He talked to Nat, maybe, but that was it, they knew each other. There were reasons they talked to each other. This was Nat's job, the talking thing.

"I am sorry," Thor was saying. "It is the truth, nothing more."

Clint stuck a finger in his own ear and waggled it around; Nat smiled from behind Thor, which was the point. She was way, way too grim right now. And kind of tipsy, which matched up with the grim.

"I'm sorry, what? You were talking and I heard I'm an idiot."

Thor growled, and Clint had a moment of reaching for his bow -- but he bent his head. "I miscalculated. There were -- I had planned what to say, and my plans were as smoke."

Clint groaned. "So basically this is the thing where you rehearse so much you end up on stage and everything flies out of your head so you say something really fucking stupid like you just did?"

"It is a most unfortunate phenomenon."

"Does that happen a lot?"

"Frequently," with not a little chagrin. "Loki was always the most skilled with words."

He wanted to flail a little. He was above it, but damn it, he wanted to. What did Thor think was going to happen? He left after pissing him off that badly and Loki was going to be sunshine and daises with them? Oh, no, they were going to get it, of course they were.

Clint wasn't looking forward to dealing with Thor's fallout. At all.

"Did you ever consider just ... stopping at 'they're yours'?"

Thor shook his head. "They are monsters. It is the truth. He must know it."

Clint gave in to the urge and whacked him with his bow. "Did he ever give you the impression he doesn't?"

Thor blinked unhappily at him. "He continues to claim them. What more reason is there?"
"Oh, my God. Okay, look, I'm going to break it down really simple for you. Sometimes people do things you don't think they should do and it's okay. Sometimes people listen to you and go and do it anyway. You don't have to go preaching. You don't have to gently correct them or whatever it was you thought you were doing. You don't threaten them. You don't guilt-trip. You let it go. Let. It. Go."

"If he is ever to return to Asgard, he must renounce them."

Clint could hear himself making weebles noises. Where the fuck was Stark? They were at the site, everything was ready, except fucking Stark and the fucking Tesseract.

And Nat refused to play voice of reason. Which was fair, she'd done it for like three hours, and she wasn't going to do any better than him with freaky alien gods, but seriously, fuck her, she could at least help.

Maybe this was a test of character thing. Fuck.

How did it happen that he was the one with the best family background? He was an orphan! He was raised in a circus by freaks and geeks and acrobats!

And yet he was apparently the only one that'd been raised by people that even vaguely liked him.

Clint gave in. Flailing was the only viable response. Being above it right now was like being above needing icecubes in his lemonade. "Why would he want to?"

Thor was looking more confused and upset by the second. "We are his family!"

"You're not acting like it, are you?"

"He would be dead if he was not!" Okay, hearing Thor lose his temper and start yelling -- that was -- right. Scary.

Clint backed off a little, holding up his hands in the calm-down-and-don't-hurt-me. "Okay. Okay. Seriously? Everyone else would've killed him?"

"Children such as he are not ... desirable. It is our father's love that has allowed him his life, and that he continues to show such ingratitude --"

"Wait, wait, waaaaait, back up. So the horse story, your dad threatened to kill him -- that was legal? Because, what, he was too weird to live?"

"He would not have." Thor paused. "I ... hope ... he would not. You put words in my mouth, friend Clint."

He flailed and weebled some more. It felt like the thing to do. God, his head hurt.

"Letting your kid get stuck in a forest with an angry stallion sounds like he wasn't exactly stepping in to help him, either!"

"He could not! Not without losing the respect of his people."

"THAT'S HIS OWN FAULT."

Thor looked horrified.

Clint was pretty horrified too.
Yelling at gods was way above his pay grade.

"Jesus, don’t kill me. Just -- okay. If he can't be bothered setting rules to protect his kid, and, you know, All-Father, incredible wisdom, he's in a fantastic position to set rules and, you know, enforce them, that says to me that maybe he just doesn't give a fuck." Clint sighed. "So, what? Loki was a massive disappointment?"

"Yes," Thor said, soberly tracing some sort of pattern on the side of Mjolnir. He did it a lot when they talked about Odin. "Our father had great expectations."

"Seriously? He told Banner he was Jotun or something? That's not in the myths. Well, the myths say he was a fire giant, but I'm assuming your dad wasn't exactly in the dark about whatever he is."

Thor shrugged. "The deepest cold does resemble fire. It is an easy mistake. Jotun are creatures of that cold. He told you?"

"Banner," Clint said. "Not me. Banner kind of has a personal stake in the whole monster thing."

And there was the confused face again. "But he is useful, and powerful. He is undisciplined, but his brawn makes up for that."

"Useful?" Clint choked and went cold, and he held up a finger. "Never, ever, ever say that to Banner. Ever. Ever. This isn't about useful. This is about the fact that your brother's pretty convinced you all think he's a monster."

"I do not," Thor said steadily. "He is my brother. My brother is not a monster. He -- he would not be."

"Because he's your brother," Clint said.

"Yes."

"Even though he's this Jotun thing." 

"Yes."

"But a Jotun who wasn't your brother would be a monster."

"Of course. They are Jotun."

Clint sort of wanted to choke him with his bow. He had replacements, Stark could tool up another if Clint promised to spar with the suit.

But he really, really wanted to choke him.

"Do you not even see how -- no, of course you don't." He took a deep breath. "Thor. You can't have it both ways. You can't go around being all 'Jotun are monsters' and then somehow make Loki believe he's the magical exception to, oh yeah, you think Jotun are monsters. It doesn't work that way. It's actually really insulting." He took a deep breath.

Thor was fidgeting with his hammer. "Explain. If you will. I sense you have very little patience for me."

"Yeah. Yeah, kinda. I'm -- okay. Listen. Just listen. Either you have a brother who is Jotun and you accept that he was Jotun from the start and maybe this might affect your view of Jotun, or you have what's happening right now and I'm actually not even sure you have a brother anymore, and I don't
think I really blame him. I -- I don't even know what to say to you. Your dad fucked you up, you
know that? He fucked. You. Up."

Thor patted his shoulder; even when Clint knew he was trying to be gentle, it was like being leaned
on by a giant. "Thank you for trying. I have ..." He sighed. "I have much to think on."

"Yeah? So do I. Like how I fucking hate him and you're the one I want to throttle most right now." He
ducked out from under Thor's hand before it could tighten. "I won't, I like my job most of the
time. That wasn't a threat. I'm just very. Frustrated."

"As am I."

"Yeah, buddy. Yeah. Did your dad know and just not tell him?"

Thor hesitated, which wasn't a good sign. "I -- yes. It seems that way."

"And -- just checking -- he was wrong for Asgard anyway?"

"Yes."

"And nobody told him there might be a reason why he was weird?"

"Yes."

"Wow," Clint said. "That's fantastic parenting."

Thor bristled. "He did his best --"

"No, no, this is personal experience, okay? I'm an orphan. I came to it pretty late, I'm old enough to
remember. I didn't have the chance to let it fuck me up because I knew what happened and the circus
that adopted me made it clear they kept me because they wanted me. That was the difference.
Okay?"

"You are forsaken?"

"If that means I outlived my folks, yeah."

Thor shook his head. "I am sorry. That is a great wrong."

Clint tried to head him off. "Hell no. No pitying me. It was good. It was a good thing. My birth
parents were fuuuuuuuucked uuuuuuup. Completely fucked up. It was GOOD for me that they died
and I found somewhere else to be. But it was good because they didn't pretend I was something I
wasn't."

"As we pretended?" Thor looked like he was feeling his way through a minefield. "I swear to you, I
did not know."

Clint eyed him. "You know, you ... the thing is. You've -- I don't know how to say this, so I'll just
out with it. You've done a lot, while you've been here. And I think you've acted like you knew,
because he wasn't the brother you wanted and whatever brotherly bond or whatever you had was in
spite of it. With all that -- I don't think it matters if you knew or not."

"How can it not?"

"Sometimes things look enough like other things that it's really easy to say 'these two things are the
same'. It's nice that you didn't mean to. It's nice. Does it matter? Not really." Clint squinted into the
horizon.

There was Stark, rolling up in a desert scooter, and Selvig next to him clutching a ridiculously pretty jar, a box on the flooring between them. Finally. It'd take them a couple minutes to finish rolling up, though.

"Clint." He turned his attention back to Thor, who had the confused face again. That face was getting a lot of workout. "That does not make sense to me."

"Yeah, well. Does it need to? I mean, does it -- really, does it need to? If you're waiting for whatever's wrong with Loki to click for you so you can make it go away, it's never gonna happen. He's crazy. I'm sorry, but he's fucking crazy. That kid is one crazy fuck. Don't try to get in the heads of crazy people and make them not crazy. It never works. Just deal with it."

Thor shook his head. "You have more experience with this than I do. Much more. It is ... it does not bode well for your history, Clint."

"I have more experience than most people ever," Clint admitted. "I grew up with crazy, a lot of crazy. My parents dying was the best thing that ever happened to me, seriously. And I recruit crazy. I mean, look at Nat, she's got a shitload of screws loose. She's forgotten where half her screws even are. Still a damn good agent. You just have to work with it, I guess."

"How do I work with my brother?"

Well, that was probably the first easy question he'd had to field today. "Don't tell him he's wrong for being crazy. He just is. Accept it, cry about it, whatever, just move on and deal with it."

Thor looked ... strange.

"What?"

"You would tell me to give up on him?"

Clint pursed his lips. "Yeah, I'm telling you to give up. He's not what you want him to be. So what? He's a bag of cats and some of them love you and some of them hate you. Learn the cats. Love the cats. It'll make everything a million times easier if you deal with what's actually in front of your face." He turned on his heel, cupping his hands around his mouth. "What took you so fucking long?"

"You'd never understand my genius," Stark shouted back.

"I don't wanna understand your genius."

Stark flipped him the finger, brushed himself off and he and Selvig did some sort of complicated transfer thing with very long tongs and a lot of breath holding, but the evil cube went in the jar and Thor ambled over and took it.

It was anti-climatic, actually, standing around in the desert and Thor clutching his hammer and the jar. No fanfare or anything really, just a guy and a cube, looking around for something like he was waiting.

Clint knew for what.

But Loki wasn't coming, and he wasn't going to.

Thor stepped up into the rough circle somebody drew. "Thank you, my friends. You have done
much. I have much to think on. I am sorry I have caused such trouble. Selvig. Thank you. Tony, Steve. I am sorry. Romanova, Clint. You have been very kind. I will think on what you have said. Doctor Banner, you have been good to my brother. Please -- please be careful. He will turn on you. He will hurt you." He took the other end of the jar. "Thank you. Goodbye."

And he was gone in a woosh of blue light.

Seriously anti-climatic.

Stark yawned. "God, all that work. I wanted fireworks or something. Romanova, fireworks?"

"I have a date."

"Ooh, really? Tell me it's with Hill, I've seen the lascivious looks --"

"I have a date," she said, mild, "with a bottle of very good vodka. You're not invited."

Stark pouted. "Fine. I have mead."

She shrugged. "If you can drink it without thinking of horse rape."

"I hate you, Agent. Hate. Hate."

Nat walked away, waving over her shoulder. "That makes me feel good about myself. Thanks!"

Clint watched Stark rub his eyebrows. "How much sleep have you had?"

"What's sleep?" half-serious.

Banner took Stark's elbow and grimaced at them. "I'll put him to bed. Come on, naptime for sleepy geniuses."

"Aw, mum." But he went without further protest, and that was evidence enough that he was about to fall over where he stood. How they'd got the scooter up this far without crashing it, Clint had no idea.

But hey, as long as it was there ... "Doctor Selvig, want a ride?"

And now they just had to deal with Loki.

Great.
Natasha took the vodka from Phil's office and a chair from a storeroom near Loki's cell and dragged them both to the walkway outside.

The wall still hadn't been cleaned up, but Cap was crouched next to Loki, wearing his very serious listening face, and Loki was hugging his knees, talking softly.

They looked up when she knocked, and Loki was surprisingly clear-eyed when he nodded to her.

"Few people can sneak up on me."

Natasha keyed the door open. "You said that before."

"Perhaps it bore repeating."

"Maybe you're easily surprised." She sauntered in, leaving the chair on the walkway, and went to sit on the floor a little away from them. "You mind if I do?"

Loki lifted an eyebrow. "I didn't take you for a drinker."

"It's been one of those weeks," she said, unscrewing the cap. "A long week. I just came from the transport site. Thor's gone off with the Tesseract."

His face was ... mixed. "I see."

"He said he'd come back as soon as he could."

"He has ever been optimistic. All-Father will not allow him leave so quickly."

"I was afraid of that," she muttered, just to see him flash his teeth.

Spin, spin, spinnerets. Spin.

Cap cleared his throat. "We were talking about ... Angabody? I didn't say it right, I'm sorry."

"Angrboda," Loki said. "Yes."

Natasha filed through her memory; she'd taken in a lot, the last few days, and she hadn't got around to sorting a good chunk of it. "She's the one you had Jorgumandur with, right?"

"His name is Jormungandr."

"Oh." She filed that. "I'm sorry. We've been saying it wrong, apparently. Jormungandr," she tried, and when Loki nodded she took a drink and went on. "The reading didn't come with a pronunciation
"Evidently," very dry. "Yes. We were together for some time. My relationship with her was much simpler than any I encountered on Asgard. She was not kind, but she did not need to be as she was so scrupulously fair. Were I at fault, it was my doing, not my being. I extended her the same courtesy. It was ... refreshing."

"Ground rules?" she guessed. "We have mission guidelines for our agents. Generally if you're breaking them you weren't clever enough for the mission to begin with or you're about to die."

He inclined his head. "Something like. You seem very well-disposed, Agent Romanova."

She shrugged. "I'm looking forward to the weekend."

"Oh?"

"Yes." Natasha took another drink, decidedly not divulging any more information.

Loki shook his head. "You are very like the Lady Sif."

"He said that too," she said lightly. "I think comparing me to the one warrior woman on Asgard isn't flattering to either of our ridiculously male-dominated cultures."

That got her a laugh, surprisingly boyish. "Agent Romanova finds herself an expert in cultural relativism," he said to Cap. "You and he are more similar than you would prefer."

Cap looked between them. "I noticed," hesitant, "in the command center that when you're with Agent Hill, you're the only two women in the room."

Natasha nodded. "Two out of forty is a good ratio for SHIELD."

"That's appalling."

"I'm exceptional," she said, half-ironic, and lowered the bottle to find Loki watching her closely.

"Barton told me of your child."

"Fetus," she corrected. "I thought he might have." Natasha nodded to the screen at Loki's side. "Is he why you didn't use it against me?"

Loki's eyes shuttered. "Rape was easier."

She considered him, and his anger then with her the trickster and he her victim, and the quick spill of repetition as he'd snarled an eloquent variation of a threat she'd heard a thousand times, then nodded. In a very strange, specific way he'd been something close to merciful. It stuck in her craw. "Thanks."

"You threatened her with--?"

"He said he was going to make Clint do it," she said. "'Slowly, intimately, in every way he knows you fear,' she repeated, then raised an eyebrow. 'Mewling quim. I need to pin Thor at some point and ask him where the hell you learned that kind of language."

Loki shook his head, shoulders more at ease, but she wasn't sure enough of her judgement at the moment to say for certain. "He was not present. Angrboda," he added.

"Ah," she said. "She called you that."
Loki scowled. "It's not what you think," he muttered.

"You've both -- right. Of course," and Cap looked even sadder. "I'm sorry. Loki, she said that to you?"

He scoffed and changed the subject with entirely too much enthusiasm. Interesting. "Did your scans not reveal my deformity?"

Cap made awkward faces. "You've been pregnant so I, er, assumed."

Loki looked diabolically entertained. "Do tell of your assumptions, Captain. Did I birth my children through my mouth? My nose, perhaps? Did I plant a toenail and water it with blood on the hour?"

She pressed her wrist to her face to hide a giggle.

"I -- er -- well -- that is --" more and more awkward and flustered. "You know."

"Yes, Captain," with a wicked gleam. "I do, and I have something wonderful to tell you. As I informed Anthony Stark, you and I are already developing a babe between us. I have decided you will have the privilege of naming our infant hedgerow. Is it not joyful news?"

"What?" a thin croak.

Loki smiled pleasantly. "Oh, you know. My nail clippings, your blood in the soup ... it was an unusual coupling." He patted his stomach, frowning and serious even as the corner of his mouth turned up. "Quite unruly in there."

Natasha cracked up laughing, bending over the bottle in her lap and wheezing.

When she looked up Captain was groaning and shaking his head behind his hands. "Loki, you -- you can't do that! Oh, good heavens, you had me going. Don't do that, it's not nice. It's just not nice."

She leaned over to pat his arm. "It would've been a beautiful hedge."

"Is fathering my children so off-putting, Captain?" Loki said, abruptly cold with malice, and Natasha inhaled danger, hand shifting to curl around the neck of the bottle as he continued. "So disgusting to your pathetic mortal sensibilities?"

Cap blinked. "I've never thought about it. I didn't expect to survive the war."

Loki sneered. "How fortunate you are."

"It wasn't personal. I just -- I don't think I'd be a good father."

"Oh?" edged, and Loki bent forward, fixed hungrily on him. "Do elaborate."

"Cap," she murmured.

Loki glared at her. "Stay your tongue, barren whore."

"Loki! That was uncalled for!"

Natasha gulped the bottle in one continuous swallow until less than a sixth remained, got to her knees, and calmly shook the remaining over his head.

Loki stared, eyes bulging. "You --" He cut himself off as she produced a lighter and snapped the lid
open, holding it just out of safe range against his face. The skin was blistering all the same, and she took a very vicious, very secret satisfaction in seeing it, in moving the lighter away just that little bit more.

"Agent Romanova --"

"I'd really sit this one out, Cap." Her hand was very steady. "I miscarried and it wouldn't move. There wasn't room. This is how I cauterised the tear in my stomach from the knife I used to get it out. Vodka, and a lighter." She paused, steadying herself. "You were eight the first time, Thor says. But you were a mare. An eight-year-old horse can deliver. I couldn't."

Natasha held his gaze. She remembered, and she knew he knew exactly what.

"Call me barren again," as soft and sure as she could be, "and I'll call you lucky. Deal?"

Loki slowly lifted a hand and wrapped it around her gloved wrist, fingers very cold, and she let him scrutinise her, eyes flickering over her face in search of something. When he found it he nodded and let go. "We have an understanding."

She sat back, snapping the lighter shut and settling the bottle between her knees. "Good. Sorry, Cap. Establishing some ground rules."

"Oh, no, don't be sorry." Cap looked a little sick, but he managed a half-credible smile anyway. "It's none of my business."

Loki was eyeing her again. "Did you name him?"

Natasha weighed the merit of answering versus not at all. "Piotr."

He tipped his head, clearing his throat and talking mostly to his knees. "I commend his spirit to rest in Vahalla."

It was one of the most awkward not-quite-apology apologies she'd ever heard, but coming from Loki it was like he'd just shit diamonds.

She was drunk enough that she could afford to be vaguely gracious and put only a little bite behind it. "Thank you."

Cap shifted uncomfortably. "I hate that conversations like this ... happen."

Loki bared his teeth. "How sad for you."

"I didn't mean --" He sighed. "No, never mind what I meant. I hate that so many people are hurt like this."

"Many?"

She considered him, putting together stray details and coming up with a picture she still didn't like. "You were the only child pregnancy on Asgard."

He shrugged. "That I was capable of shifting so far was taken as proof of my unnaturalness. We grow in battle, and no woman bleeds until their twelfth name day."

"Eight here," she said, raising a hand.

He inclined his head. "I was younger and ... confused. My mother -- the All-Mother," hasty self-
correction, "made it somewhat bearable. It was kept hidden, as were most of my stranger qualities. Thor will not know," he said fiercely. "He thinks only by virtue of my magic and study did I carry Svadilfari's get."

"It's up to you what you tell him and what you don't," Cap said. "We're not going to spread your private business."

Natasha leaned back on the heels of her hands. "We talk to Thor about Asgard in general, mostly. There's enough fodder there for a thousand conversations. Most of them with a fair bit of shouting."

Loki gave a sharp little laugh. "He has ever basked in Asgard's regard without cause to question it. It is not surprising."

Cap picked at a stray thread in his trousers. "You weren't cause?"

"Oh, no, Captain. I deserved my lot." His smile was very resigned. "I am a liar, all is said and done. Asgard holds no honour for liars, and even less for the word of Jotun."

"How does that work?" Natasha said, coming to attention. "Does that mean you're considered a liar by default?"

He inclined his head. "An ant does not have the voice to quarrel with a boot," smiling to himself. "Though I make a poor ant."

"You're more like an army ant," she said. "They have jaws half the size of their bodies. In swarms they can bring down humans."

Loki looked pleased. "Your Midgardian creatures are inventive."

Time to puncture it. "Thor said it was possible to repatriate you here as property."

Cap frowned at her. "He said what? How can -- I mean --" He waved at Loki. "You're brothers, aren't you? Isn't that slavery?"

Loki flashed him a bothered look and angled himself to face her. "Did he say that?" very mild. "It's true enough. Entirely legal, though I had thought even his arrogance would pause before such an action."

"He said he wouldn't. But it didn't sound like he had any other ideas."


Natasha raised her eyebrows. "You have an idea."

"I have many," he said smoothly. "Their viability is another matter. It would be a good plan, to sell me as a thrall, if I was so inclined to allow it." A tiny smile. "I am not."

"So it is slavery."

"Captain, do you enslave your clothing? Your linens? Your shield?"

"Well, no --"

"Why?" He looked genuinely interested.

"Well, they're -- they're not alive," Cap said. "They don't have minds."
"Neither do Jotun in the eyes of Asgard. They can be reasoned with to a fashion, and trained by application of great punishment and few rewards. But alas we have no honour, and thus no sense worth mentioning. Recalcitrant dogs, really."

Natasha toyed with the bottle, rolling it on her thigh. "Do you believe that?"

Loki considered her. "I believe you are sincere," after a long silence. "No. I do not. And yes. It was long my brother's wish to destroy Jotunheim. I merely concluded his efforts." He smiled to himself. "Oh, how he raged."

Cap sounded horrified. "You destroyed a planet to one-up your brother?"

Loki shrugged and flicked his fingers. "And here I only brought an army. Aren't you fortunate?"

"Wasn't Angrboda one of them?" Cap said.

Loki smiled. "Is it not evident, Captain? One person does not represent a race. Even Thor cannot accomplish such a task. Ah, I have sickened you."

He pressed a fist to his mouth, shaking his head. "Yes," he said quietly. "It's just -- maybe you had family there. Maybe they --"

"Nay," he snapped. "I was abandoned. I have no family but my children."

Natasha didn't buy it. "Who said you were abandoned?"

"All-Fath --" Loki's mouth worked and he lifted his head, nostrils flaring, knuckles flushed in circles of red where his hands gripped his shins. "You lie," he said fiercely, words crisp and sure, and Natasha saw his throat tremble. "I am called liar, and yet, you are the liars. There is no -- I could not have -- you lie. I have no family. Whether there was or not. I have none now. I was not wanted. None care for me. That is as it shall be."

"Loki --"

"You will not speak of this further!"

Cap sighed and sat back. "Okay."

Loki twitched violently. "You try my patience. You all try my patience."

She tipped her head. "Fair game. You're hell on ours."

"Trickster," he said. He sniffed, nose wrinkling. "You're drunk."

Time to leave. Natasha got to her feet. "Not yet, but I plan to be."

"Good ... ah, luck, with your endeavour," with great distaste.

Cap waved a hand to get her attention. "Could you send someone to maybe clean up the wall?"

"Aye aye, Cap."

"Did Angrboda never drink?" Cap said as the door closed behind her.

"No, she always ..."
Loki smiled and if she hadn't seen it herself she wouldn't have believed it, but he relaxed and angled his entire body toward Cap, posture no longer vibrating with tension.

It was either genuine or extraordinary manipulation and whatever it was, Natasha was impressed.

Cap was good at making himself the most important person around, even to godly little brats with short attention spans, and it'd buy Stark enough time to take apart the scans of Loki's cuff-and-chain setup and see how much of his magic they really controlled.

She left the lighter on the chair closest to the door in case Cap needed it for demonstration purposes. Not that he'd use it. But Loki would know it was there.
This was why he didn't want to sleep. Freaky waterboarding rape nightmares and horse's heads under the water staring at him just weren't worth the effort of going to sleep to start with.

Tony loaded up on coffee, bagels and Jarvis' weather alerts, decided his hair was good enough he didn't need to shower, and trekked out to the pavillions they were still using for shield development.

Turned out Arizona sand at 2 AM was primed to get under his toenails even in shoes. Who the fuck knew?

There was a light on in the tent, though, and Tony busted in, ready to open a can of Stark Industries Whoop-Ass, when he saw Selvig staring at projections of ... well, somebody with really curvy handwriting. Wasn't there a thing about open o's showing insecurity or something?

"That looks like the Voynich manuscript," letting the flap fall and gravitating to the heater next to Selvig. More coffee, yay. "I mean, it's pretty, but what is it?"

"Something Loki thought I needed to know."

"Really? You didn't mention it last night, I'm hurt. I thought we were going steady."

Selvig didn't answer, and Tony grimaced when he realised he was brooding. First Bruce, now Selvig? What was he, moody scientist magnet?


Tony was studying it now, though, and the more he looked the less he liked it. It was science, sure, but nothing like he'd ever seen. The full stops ran away, which was just bizarre, and sometimes he finished a sentence and read a new one that hadn't been there before. It wasn't alive, and it wasn't Jarvis, and having Jarvis doublecheck the paper just showed wood pulp and graphite.

It felt smooth and natural and it was just so much fucking easier to think when it was just him and somebody. Him and Bruce. Him and Selvig. Him and whoever. More than that in his territory -- and the tents were his territory, damnit -- made him so uncomfortable he kept wishing he could go back to sleep even with the freaky nightmares. But he couldn't sleep. He couldn't. Fucking. Sleep.

Tony's eyes crossed, and it wasn't on purpose. "You're seeing this too, right?"

Selvig pointed. "Yes. If I read this sentence," highlighting, "this one seems to follow. If I read this one and try to follow it with this, my eyes ... skid."

"Yeah, that's -- that's a good way to put it."
Fuck, it wasn't even the original, they were looking at a scan, and it was still doing freaky shit.

It was in the words, somehow. "Can't that kid ever not be cryptic?"

Selvig snorted. "It's not a gift if it's not difficult."

Tony thought of Steve. "Yeah. Yeah, okay, this part looks familiar -- didn't you write something like that?"

"Banner said it was an improved version of my calculations. And that Loki said I'd know when I needed it."

"That ..." He thought it over. "Fuck, okay, there was -- we had a theory there was someone powerful controlling the Chitauri, right? What if that someone's still coming? I bet it's not for Loki's glowing performance review."

Selvig was still matching up sentences. "Whoever can control Loki and the Chitauri has to be powerful."

Tony pointed at the screen, watching the words, but also -- they had a shape. They were moving because they had shape. It was like making pi a rational number.

"Hang on, Jarvis, switch up that squiggle with a bit of division -- no, stack it, purple green purple, stack it, come on," words writhing helpfully, they wanted to arrange them themselves, god, that was fucking weird, "Yup, cut it there -- is that a parenthesis? That's a parenthesis, find and replace -- keep stacking -- fuck."

He stared.

Well, he hadn't seen maths like that before.

But he knew where he'd seen maths like, and he stared at Selvig, still pointing.

"Powerful enough to scare him shitless?"

Selvig winced. "They're gods."

"Come on, this stuff is like -- I mean, we're scientists, we know this shit, I'm pretty sure I'm looking at your anti-stable wormhole theory on steroids. This is like ... trade secrets. This is what you made the Tesseract do, except that this ... god, if we figure out the rest of this, I can just fucking skip the Tesseract with a few of the tower sources. Why the fuck would he give this up?"

"Either we're bait," he said slowly, "or we're in the way."

Tony spread his hands. "Why would the Chitauri have the blue stick of destiny? They were a hive mind. Frogs don't need stilettos. Wait, bait. Bait? Bait? That lying, conniving, hypocritical little fuck! He's not staying because he wants off Asgard. He's staying because -- because --" He snapped his fingers, mouth trying to keep up with his brain. "Damnit, we just packed off our biggest ally with enough doubt to occupy him for years and I bet you anything whatever's coming has a direct line into Loki's fucking head."

"A beacon," Selvig said. "Like the Tesseract. If he can guide them here -- but we have the magic shield."

"And if we shield him, Asgard can't know what the fuck he's doing, so if he decides to go rogue they
can't help anyway, and we can't hand him over without looking like complete fucking tools." Tony kicked a chair, feeling perfectly justified. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. Completely fucking played. Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

"But why tell us now?"

Selvig had a point, yeah, and Tony worked his hands through fistfuls of his hair, staring as Jarvis continued to assemble Loki's writing into ridiculously beautiful probabilities. It was enough to give him a stiff if the situation weren't so fucked.

"Maybe he wants us to have a chance. Maybe he just wants to see what we can do. Maybe it's some kind of hazing to see if we're worthy of hosting his royal ass. I don't fucking know, I don't fucking care. I'll get that little shit if the last thing I fucking do. Jarvis, prep my sub."

"What are you going to do?" Selvig looked alarmed. "You can't possibly be thinking of threatening Jormungandr."

Tony grinned, shark-like. "Nope. I'm gonna make introductions. Then I'm gonna tell him if he ever wants to see his kid again, he's going to have to work with us. Sure, it's dirty pool. I think it's fair. If the shield isn't strong enough to conceal what's happening, well, geez, he's the one who chose not to use enough magic for us to calibrate properly, isn't he?"

It was funny to be this pissed off. Hilarious, really.

"He thinks he can fuck with me? Nuh-uh. Keep working, bossman. I'm nannying a playdate. Jarvis, sub, hello. Buy that part of the water while I'm at it."

"You can't just buy the ocean!"

"I'm Tony Fucking Stark!"

He let the flap fall behind him and trudged on, swearing as he left Pepper a million messages (why wasn't she awake, god, it was only four in the morning) and argued exorbitant bribes, waiting for the deed as he stamped sand out of his shoes and sailed past baffled SHIELD guards.

Tony booted cruise ships off his newly-acquired property, had the sub's kitchen stocked and his jet fired up to land on the base in approximately ten minutes, and placed a call.

Ten years ago Tony would've thought of Fury as an obstruction, would've considered him irritating and inefficient, too much of a bureaucrat. The Tony of ten years ago hadn't met Pepper yet. People said he ran the world because they hadn't met Pepper.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" Fury asked when Tony outlined his plan. Tony had a suspicion Fury was only barely vertical.

"No?"

He could almost hear Fury's eyebrows pinching. "You're proposing taking an emotionally unstable baby god on a submarine without supervision or containment other than restraints he's made damn clear don't work."

Tony grimaced. "I know it sounds like a recipe for certain death --"

"Stark, you are the recipe for certain death." Ouch. "SHIELD can't help you at 4,000 feet."
"Yeah."

Why was the base so big, anyway? It wasn't like they even had decent R&D. Right turn, left turn, right, no, fuck, left again. He didn't usually go through R&D but he needed to pick out likely geospatial scientists that would aid his valorous course. And of course they were all fucking asleep this time of night. Slackers.

"Not asking you to. Just thought you should know. You know, if this works, it --" Tony couldn't explain. It wasn't like tech. He could explain tech. He just didn't know how to explain this feeling that Loki would do so fucking much, would be the most fucking honest to get to see his kids if somebody would just fucking let him earn it. And actually Tony could say just that, so he did.

There was quiet on the phone for a long while, and he'd almost think Fury was asleep if he couldn't hear the grumbling. "You fuck this up --"

"Yeah, yeah, dredge my corpse, I know." The idea that Fury was actually concerned was uncomfortable as hell.

"All your corpses. Be careful with my people, Stark."

Tony ten years ago would've thought Fury was just a bureaucrat in the way. Tony ten years back had seriously been fucking stupid sometimes. "Yeah, okay."

He stared at the guards until they let him pass, ostentatiously loading their rifles, and whistled his way into Loki's cell.

"Rise and shine, sunshine."

Loki blinked, hair ridiculously fluffy. Who'd gone at it with a hairdryer? "What are you about, Stark?"

"Family visitation," Tony sing-songed, waggling a hand at the screen tucked under Loki's head. "I mean, unless you won't want to, I'll cancel the boat --"

Loki grabbed his lapels, breath hot in his face. Awesome, someone got him a toothbrush. "What do you want?"

Tony grinned over the threatening panic. "World peace. Better question. What do you want?"

"World domination."

"Oh. Jarvis, cance -- urk. Don't shoot!"

"Hold," Loki snarled, hands curled so tightly in Tony's shirt his knuckles pressed on the reactor cage hard enough to make him wheeze, eyes wide and ferocious. "What do you want?"

"I'll answer seriously if you do."

That got him a snarl. "Fine."

"I want to live. So don't shoot, you guys." Shit, shit, ow, fuck. "I want the world to live. I mean, I kind of hate it here, but, you know, my planet. Duty of care and all that. Wait, that's nurses. Anyway, sooo ... who's chasing you, huh? Who makes you sound like that? You beg in your sleep, you know. Who made you do that? Doesn't it just burn?" He could still feel the ground. Mostly. Just with his toes, but it helped.
Loki growled at him, long and low, and Tony could ... actually see how this guy gave birth to a wolf or something, because seriously, that was wolfy. "Thanos."

Tony rolled his eyes, lips going numb. "Never heard of him."

"If you wish me to elucidate," soft and menacing, "you will take me to my son."

"Sir, put him down," one of the guards called out. "He can't breathe. He passes out, we'll take it as a threat to SHIELD. We will respond."

Loki made considering faces, still overlaid with that bright-eyed crazed need, then lowered him off his tiptoes, thank fuck Tony could feel the floor with his heels again, he wasn't that short, fucking freakishly strong tall people.

"You have to come back up," Tony said, dropping the act and rubbing his chest. "I'll give you an hour."

"Three."

"Two. And you come back up when called. You know you can't escape me. Not the way you are now. I mean, you could give me the slip for a while. But I'd find you. I'll always find you." Tony didn't have to threaten, that was the beauty of it. He could just tell the truth.

Loki looked torn, and angry, and were those tears? Jesus. "Two. No less."

"Fine. You can have a watch or something. Can you breathe underwater?"

"Yes."

Tony had a thought. "Ice too? 'cause, you know, frost giant."

"Yes."

Okay, that was -- huh. A thought. Huh. He earmarked it and went on.

"Cool. So that's why your lungs are so weird, it was bothering Bruce. Call I call you Frosty?"

"My son," Loki said, low warning.

Tony grinned and shook his head. "You know, that's not enough. You have to work with us. I want ... all of your information on this Thanos guy, the Chitauri, a full explanation of what the hell that shit you gave Selvig is about, and eighty non-consecutive research hours out of you. I won't poke, no needles or whatever, but I want readings. Accurate readings. And I want you to show me what you can do. Without hurting or affecting anyone else, that is."

"It's hardly fun to reveal all my secrets."

"It's not about fun, sweetheart." Tony kept the grin, and let his eyes speak for him. "You wanna see your kid that bad? You'll do this for us."

He was perfectly willing to die for this world; he'd done it before, he'd done it again, and Cap was a shitty influence but there it was. Character growth sucked.

Loki considered him, the air hanging still for a long, slow moment. "You so easily believe I lie."

"Oh, please. I've studied the shit Thor slapped on you. You're burning through the buffers like crazy.
They underestimated you by like, forty percent. You can't tell me every magician ever could keep up an illusion that perfect for four hours in a row and mojo up a few snakes on top with the cuffs still on and not pass out. Who do you think I am, stupid? Popeye?"

Loki relaxed a little at that. "Two hours."

"Yup."

"Afterwards you will have your ... eighty hours, and explanations. When that is done I wish to see my son again." It sounded like he was actually asking.

Tony decided to take it in the same spirit. He could be chivalrous or whatever. "I can do another two hours at the end. Okay."

"I accept."

He brushed his hands away from his neck. "Great. You can stop now, people. Thanks." The guard nodded back. "Hey, Frosty, ever been on a real jet?"

Smuggling Loki out of the base was ridiculously easy once he discovered Fury was mysteriously absent and got Steve and Romanova involved. Invoking jurisdiction wasn't exactly fun considering Romanova was still firmly in the camp of SHIELD asset temporarily loaned to the Initiative, but he made it work. He asked Barton and Bruce too, but both of them said they had work to do. Barton even hid in the ceiling. Pft. He just wasn't feeling the Stark love yet. Maybe a new bow.

Natasha was hiding behind huge sunglasses, and Steve was chipper and cheery and horrible, but their simultaneous scariness worked to get Loki fresh tubes and food bags, a checkup to the wounds on his face, and to the airstrip and into the air. The four guards just bristling with weapons helped too. The sub wasn't big enough for the full eight, and both Steve and Romanova were there anyway.

Loki looked ridiculously out of place, gingerly lowering himself onto the seat and eyeing the jet's decor like he was a fashion photographer deciding it was sooooo last year.

Well, fuck him, it was the autumn scheme.

Tony sat across from Loki and busied himself with editing tower schematics -- seriously, engineering this was going to be a work of fucking art or he'd stab Barton with one of his own arrows -- and absently ate the breakfast served. Croissants, decent. Jam, terrible. Toast, perfect. Coffee, bliss. Typical fare.

Loki stole what he didn't eat straightaway, and it was really annoying to reach for toast and see it disappearing into his wretched little mouth. Tony ended up ordering five breakfasts in a row, hoping he could at least assemble one full breakfast in between all the gobbling, before Loki burped into the back of his hand, figured out the footrest, and went to sleep without even a thank you.

Tony took vicious pleasure in kicking the footrest just to watch him startle and clutch his feet, turning a really unattractive shade of pale green as his stomach caught up.

"Wakey wakey. Keep it down. You can sleep on the boat, come on."

Loki got off the jet, shooting him vicious looks and holding his hand to his mouth. Quick chauffeur ride and they were going up the gangway to his sub -- the Aenid, because it was epic and the pretentiousness bothered Howard -- and Tony was showing them where to settle in.

"That's the workshop, you can't go in there, those doors are my bedrooms, you're all there and there
and there for those people who need naptime. Bathrooms to your left. Seriously, don't go in my workshop, I mean it."

Which left him stretched out on the sealed deck with Steve, bothering Selvig and drinking mojitos as an ocean roared past the walls and filled the room with reflected, wavering blue.

"You're pretty sure of this ... magic thing," Steve said beside him. He had a phillips screwdriver in hand and a floppy hat and was the very picture of discomfort. Apparently he hadn't expected a literal submarine. Apparently he actually hadn't expected Loki to be a literal genocidal shithead. What was the word for genocide of a planet? Xenocide?

Tony crossed his feet and tucked them under his rug. It was pretty cold inside but not cold enough for aircon and Tony had the power here. It was good to be in power. He'd spent too much of the last couple weeks just reacting to shit. "Yeah. I mean, you know they have tests to measure muscular strength now, right? Like, not just self-reported surveys, but actual studies. Loki's stronger than the guys that play tugboat with 767s."

"People do that?"

"Oh, yeah, it's on youtube. Jarvis, pull it up. Watch."

They watched the strongman pull the plane, Tony unable to stop cackling as Steve's jaw dropped and dropped and dropped in disbelief. "All the shit that's happened in 70 years and that's the thing that weirds you? You're unbelievable." He waved it out of the console when he was done, more interested in cross-referencing Loki's maths with Selvig's data.

Steve sighed at him. It was totally sighing at him, Tony knew a Tonysigh when he heard it. "You were talking about Loki?"

"Right. Anyway, muscles. Thor is immeasurable, literally, they can't record him. Or the Hulk. It makes the scientists cry and go home to jerk off. Loki, on the other hand, just makes us look like fragile little daises. He's about fifteen percent stronger than you, which, we already knew Stuttgart was a diversion, but it's nice to get it confirmed."

There it was, another Tonysigh. "Thor said --"

"Yeah, I know what he said. Blah blah, my weak little brother, relies on tricks, blah blah whatever, but he's like you with us, everybody's chickenshit next to him. Except Hulk. But Hulk's got his own weight class."

He drained a mojito and made up another. It just wasn't his boat without mojitos.

"Point is, he doesn't need magic to kill us. The cuffs don't have anything to do with strength. Short version, he could twist off our heads with his bare hands if he wanted. Literally the only thing stopping him from just frolicking off the base is whatever the fuck's going on in his head and a couple tasers."

"Frolicking, Stark?" very amused from behind him.

"Hey Frosty," waving without looking. Even Romanova couldn't pull off quite that much contempt in two words. She usually needed at least three. "What?" he said to Steve's weirded face. "He didn't say I couldn't call him that. Have a seat, have a mojito, d'you like mojitos? How about you?" The guards turned him down, spoilsports.

"Hi, Loki."
"Captain." Loki sauntered up next to him, barefoot and wrapped in a coat probably stolen out of Tony's wardrobe, and bent to delicately sniff Tony's glass. "Perhaps I would like one."

Tony sat up to make another one, not missing the way Loki watched him, probably memorising so he could make his own.

God, it was like a morning after in his limo with Ms April on the calendar. Except Loki was fatter and didn't beg for coke money and Tony didn't do jailbait. But Loki didn't poke at Jarvis either, wasn't seasick and didn't seem to care they were going 330km/hr on Tony's clean energy reactors. It was a good tradeoff.

Loki sipped and made a face, holding it away. "What is this?"

Tony took it back and poured half into his own glass and topped up Loki's with lemonade, a trick he remembered from getting into Howard's cabinets every week when he was eight until Howard packed him off to boarding school. Diluting with lemonade or OJ was the only way he'd found to make spirits bearable until he turned fourteen and decided to ditch the mixers in a misplaced bid for adulthood. "Try that."

Loki seemed to find that acceptable and curled himself on a lounger across from Tony and Steve, for all the world fascinated by the windows. At this depth it was still bright and clear out there. "How long until I reach him?"

"We have about four and a half hours at this speed. Relax. Take a load off. Play twenty questions with Capiscle or something. Jarvis, show him on the wall where we're going." The map popped up in cross-section that rolled forward as they moved, showing underwater typography and a red dot in the centre. "The light is your kid. Leave it up, Jarvis."

Loki fixed his eyes on it, creepily intense. "Why twenty questions in particular?"

"Because by fifteen it's either really boring or really personal and at twenty you just wanna get drunk and forget the whole thing ever happened. I vote option two!"

Steve looked prim. "I don't think you should get drunk on a sub."

Tony rolled his eyes and called up the Tesseract portal data. The Chitauri energy readings funked it up, but luckily Bruce did enough work with the background radiation to screen out the bugs. What was left over looked like a miniature black hole, if black holes were the 'I just split the crotch of my pants' moments of the universe. Maybe they were.

That ... explained a lot, actually. The cosmic whatever probably spent a lot of time being really embarrassed and looking for their keys. Selvig didn't appreciate his email outlining his genius theory and wrote as much in chat, but that was fine, Selvig wasn't that brilliant anyway. "It's my sub, I can if I want. Loki, more mojito?"

"You shouldn't be getting him drunk either."

"Oh, please. All that mead and he can't pace himself?"

"Your concern is not appreciated," Loki said, incredibly peevish and glaring at Cap. He drank his refill a lot slower, though.

"Peer pressure is bad, Cap," Tony said, and broke up giggling when Steve huffed. "No, seriously, I mean, you're -- seriously, how the fuck are we supposed to work out your age anyway? Give me something to work with here."
Loki huffed, exactly like Cap, and Tony drowned him out with giggles.

"Sorry, sorry -- go on, go on. He sounded like you!" Steve glared. "No? Fine. Go on."

Incredibly, Loki looked uncomfortable. "The span from Asgard name-day to name-day is roughly two hundred of your years."

Tony looked at him over his sunglasses. "Dude, just in case you didn't know -- you're old."

"I am not mortal," Loki said, finishing the mojito and setting it on the floor, tucking himself in under a rug. It was kind of cute. Snug as a bug in a rug.

That got Tony imagining Chitauri and ugh, no.

Bad mental image. He dosed it away with more mojitos. He'd write himself a fake prescription if he had to. "Yeah, but what do you even do with all that time? Do you just all wank constantly?"

Loki flashed a grin. "No. We sleep several of your days at a stretch, and fight the same. Your revolutions are very short."

"So basically we're mayflies." Tony stared at a mint leaf, then ate it. "I don't wanna be a mayfly, that's just -- that's just wrong. So when Thor says he'll come back soon -- that's kind of a lie, isn't it?"

He shrugged. "It may be soon, to one on Asgard. For you it may be a century."

Tony pinched his forehead. "Fantastic. That wouldn't have anything to do with your sneaky little failsafe, would it?"

"I have no idea what you mean," smooth as clotted cream.

"Failsafe? If there's something else you're not telling me --"

"Never mind," Tony said, and goggled in horror at Loki when he realised they'd just done an acapella duet.

Loki didn't look much better, glaring like it was somehow Tony's fault Cap had to be protected from his own stupid do-gooder heroism.

Mojitos for both of them, definitely mojitos. Loki even thanked him when he didn't water it down as much this time.

Apparently the Twilight Zone was blue and aboard his sub.

Well, then.
They got to the edge of the territory in the four hours Tony claimed, but it took another hour for them to get to Jormungandr; he'd chosen his hiding spot very well, apparently, and maneuvering to get the sub roughly where Loki could dive down took Jarvis' close control and Tony's concentration.

Steve watched them, listened to them talk in naval codes half-familiar and half-strange, and tried not to think of seventy years awake. He watched Loki instead.

Loki wound himself tighter and tighter as they approached until he shut his eyes and went silent between one moment and the next. He was asleep, or seemed to be, blanket framing long lashes and healing cheeks.

They were much, much better than the photograph Steve saw even if they weren't entirely healed, shrunken to pink dots and a slight slur on l and r, but he doubted that even if they went away he would forget the look of him with his bleeding mouth and scornful eyes.

It was always the photographs, not the memories. Memories changed, could change, filed through until they lost their luster and twisted into being more about one thing than another. Photographs froze a moment, or several, and poured them into sepia the way mosquitoes flailed as they drowned in sap.

These days they were in colour, so much colour, rich with it, and had he needed to know that Loki bled red? Had he, really? Had he needed to be reminded of the exact tone of skin peeling and translucent after being soaked in fluid for two days?

It would be easier if he could genuinely pretend innocence of that sort of thing, pretend that it was all Loki's fault somehow for showing him something new. But it wasn't anything new, it wasn't his fault, and Steve felt rather like one of the helpless mosquitoes himself.

Murdering a world. He'd murdered a world, and he was proud. Only an army on Midgard, indeed. Steve wanted to laugh, but refrained. It was too terrible even for gallows humour. Dum Dum would've disagreed, would've told him to draw it into his pornographic pamphlets, but Dum Dum wasn't here, none of them were.

Loki stirred, one eye slitting open, and he didn't seem at all surprised to be watched. "Captain."

Tony was too busy arguing with Jarvis to drag him into another discussion over the morality of giving centuries-old angry teenagers alcohol, so Steve went over and sat on the chair next to him.

"Hey. How're you feeling?"

"I have no idea," Loki said, and shifted to sit up, running a hand through his hair. "Anticipatory. And afraid he will not remember me. He was not very old."

Steve had all of the things he remembered saying -- you're their mother, of course they will, you were missed, you were loved, they thought of you the way you thought of them -- and even then they felt wrong because sometimes none of that was true. But now, looking at Loki, it was even more disturbing to contemplate giving him human platitudes for an inhuman situation.

Seeing him for a few hours wouldn't make him someone Loki knew to be his child any more or less than birthing him made Loki someone Jormungandr knew to be his mother.
He just couldn't offer any kind of certainty.

"You'll find out," he said instead.

"No assurances of love, Captain?"

Steve shrugged. "I think we both know it's not that easy."

Loki sighed and rubbed around the cuffs, kicking under the blanket for a moment and bringing the chain up to rest in his lap. "Yes. I'll discover what I may. It may not be him at all. If I am mistaken --"

"Do you really think there's a chance of that?" Steve hesitated, then plunged on. "You've been listening to him for a long time now. I gave you the computer and you recognised him. It's not -- if it doesn't work out, it's not because you made a mistake. Even if that might be easier to cope with at first."

"Captain," smiling, "I do believe you are trying to comfort me."

Steve smiled back. He couldn't and wouldn't forget what Loki had done. But what he could he do about it now, other than kill him? Scold him? He doubted Loki would even understand why, and Steve didn't have any authority over him to make him understand. But this, he could do. "Is it working?"

"Perhaps," Loki said loftily. "Time shall tell. Is that what you wished to say?"

"Ah, yeah." He ducked his head, embarrassed. "That obvious?"

"You're not at all subtle." Loki got up, entire body freezing for a moment on the red dot that was so much larger now. Steve had been watching it steadily grow over the last hour. "It shall be soon, then."

"Yeah. Listen, are you sure you can survive that kind of pressure? He's down pretty deep."

Loki shook his head. "Not in this form."

"And you can shapeshift in those cuffs?"

"Of course, Captain," soft and mild. "It is no trouble to pretend to a tick, or a flea, and listen. You say so much when you think I cannot hear."

"You were there," Steve said, not quite surprised, but not really impressed either. It made sense, but ... "When Thor left."

"Yes." Loki's mouth twisted. "His opinion of my children will never change. How fortunate his irrelevance."

"You could have asked."

Loki glared, eyes bright. "Would any of you have told? I think not. Your much-vaunted sentiment would have stoppered your tongue. Agent Romanova, perhaps, if she heard. But she did not."

"You're very ..." Steve tried to find the words. "Justifiably cynical."

Loki gave a bladed grin. "Captain, what else would I be?"

"Oh hey, hey you guys, almost there. Frosty, you wanna suit up or something?"
"I do not need one." Loki frowned at the projection, the little model of their boat slowly rising through water that brightened to absurd clarity through the windows. It was a little odd to know that an alien god had a better grasp of electronics than he did.

Kids these days. And now he sounded like an old crank.

"I'm pretty sure you'll explode at eight thousand feet," Tony said.

Loki shrugged. "Your mortal forms are pathetically fragile."

"Your funeral. Just -- you know, even if you're dying, come back up. I have to have a corpse to show Thor or he'll have my head. Please at least bring up a head, okay? Bob up or something. Like, flap a tendon?"

That got him a very flat stare that made Steve smile behind his hand. "Did you not mention a timekeeper?"

Tony dug in the mess he'd somehow already made of the table and reached for Loki's wrist, putting on something that resembled no watch Steve had ever seen.

"That links up with Jarvis so we can keep an eye on you. Tolerates cold down to minus -300, and it won't explode until 10,000ft. Try to avoid going down that far, okay? It'll do this," tapping the projection, and Steve saw it prod Loki's skin, "when it's time to go back up. If you're going the wrong way it'll direct you. Don't die. Go off the top and dive. Um ... that's everything. Good luck?"

Loki nodded. "Thank you," so soft Steve wasn't sure he'd heard it, and, actually, he wasn't done. He just couldn't let him go like that.

"Want a hug first? You know, moral support?"

Tony gawped. "What? Oh, my God, Cap, what the fuck?"

Loki blinked at him, morphing from startled speechless to suspicious speechless. "I would not object," eventually, holding himself still.

Steve stepped forward, letting him see his hands, and pulled him into a hug, wrapping his arms around his shoulders.

He had a moment of wondering if he'd be killed for taking him seriously when Loki's hands came up between them. The faint clutch at his shirt and the slight lean of his body told him not to let go.

Tony snickered behind him. "Aww, yeah, Cap."

Loki pressed closer, shoulders hunching, and Steve glared over his head. "Knock it off."

"Fine, fine," turning back to his mess. "This is so weird."

It was, that was true. But Loki was fine-boned and trembling and still much too cold -- frost giant? -- and if Steve could help by doing this, he would. It wasn't the first time he'd held a mother about to be reunited with a separated child. He doubted it'd be the last.

There was nothing weird about that, even if everything else was very alarming. He did, after all, have at the base of his throat the hands of a god that according to Tony could easily twist his head off, had orchestrated the execution of Steve didn't know how many people like himself.

But Loki felt more inclined to cry on him than hurt him at the moment, and Steve dared to rub his
back a little.

"You are soft like my mother," a weary mumble.

Steve had no idea what to say to that, steadying him as the sub rocked a little and steadied, half-out of the water. "Was she good to you?"

Loki shrugged, and Steve was alarmed by just how many bones and tendons he could feel without even trying. "When I was young. Then I became a disappointment. She held me again when I was given kingship."

"Wait, that was serious? Your mum did that?" Tony was listening, obviously. "Thor said you were a pretender."

Loki shook his head against Steve's shoulder. "She wanted me to make my father proud."

Oh, sweet heavens.

Well. Steve understood that, and held him closer.

"Don't pity me," Loki snarled, beginning to pull away.

Steve let his arms fall away slowly. "I don't pity you. I'm just sorry you never had a chance."

"My son has never needed one," Loki said, stepping back and brushing his wrist across his face. "I don't care if he remembers me. I will tell him."

He turned on his heel and left, almost fleeing, and Steve let him, rubbing the chill from his arms.

Tony was squinting at him. "Where was the wisdom in that?"

"He was hurting," Steve said.

"The kid's an open wound! He's all spite and rawhide, emphasis raw. I don't know why you're going around hugging him."

"Why were you going around hugging me?"

Tony pouted. "I thought we weren't talking about that, damnit. Steve, come on. That's -- that's --" He closed his eyes, expression one of pain. "If I say any more I'm going to sound exactly like Thor, aren't I?"

"Yes," Steve said, as nicely as he could.

"Fuck. Well, I'm not going to. See if he's launching properly. Push him off or something, he's not moving from up top."

Steve sighed and went up top. The inside of the sub was extraordinarily luxurious, but it was still a submarine and he'd climbed out of one before.

The water was very still, the wind mild, and Steve swung a leg out over the railing and edged his way to where Loki stood.

He was so pale the white scars stood out purple on his face, thin and lost. "I thought if I called to him he would come. He always came to me wherever he went, no matter how far. If he remembered, he would come."
Steve showed his hand, put his arm around his shoulder and shuffled closer, and his heart sank when Loki started to cry on him.

Loki would never, ever do anything like this if he were feeling at all like himself. Steve's first impression of him had been of someone extraordinarily proud, and Loki had done nothing until now to disprove that. It was unnerving to feel him shake, worse still to hear him struggle to breathe.

"Shh. Shh." Steve moved his feet a little and hooked an arm around the rail, awkwardly clutching Loki's elbow. "Shh. Maybe he needs to see you. It's -- there's memory in the skin too, right? Tell you what, you go down and see him and if you describe him when you come back up, I'll draw him for you, okay? You'll keep it and all."

A hard, tortured breath, and Loki pulled back with a forced cough. "Yes, all right. You had best listen very carefully to my description. I expect accurate detail."

"Sure." Steve smiled a little, seeing his back straighten. "You need to do anything special?"

Loki shook his head. "No." He put his hand on Steve's shoulder and Steve helped him up to balance on the rail, shifting on his feet and rolling his shoulders. "Watch carefully, Captain. You'll never see this again."

He sprang from the railing, throwing himself backwards, arms coming over his head and arrowing to a point. From the tips of his fingers to his toes he turned blue, flushed blue, red eyes flashing as he snaked into the water and the air hissed with a shock of cold in his wake.

Steve blinked.

"Tony to Capsicle, I got a camera on him. Come down and watch?"

"Oh. Yes. I'll be there in a minute."

If that was a frost giant, they were beautiful.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

It's never a good sign when you sniffle at your own chapter.

Natasha really didn't appreciate being woken up by Stark's cheerful whistling. She'd debriefed Fury and Hill and planned to go to bed after she brushed her hair but she was still at the vanity, slumped over her makeup bag. More tired than she'd thought, and she stared at herself, half-brushed, half-mussed.

It was a pity this was a working holiday. She straightened and pushed at her lower back, working out the kinks there from the injury she'd taken a week ago landing on Stark's roof, compounding the aches from the Hulk a little before that, and counted to five.

On six the door creaked open and Stark peered at her, his head stuck around the edge of the door. A terrible habit. Easy enough to choke him from here if she kicked just right, and for a moment she contemplated it with a kind of wistfulness. The bed was right there, and her back hurt. "Family visitation a go!" He pouted at her; even reflected it was terribly childish. "I wanted tits, no tits?"

She blinked and rubbed at the lines she could see in the mirror and took as long to compose herself as she damn needed. He could wait, and eventually she lifted her head and raised an eyebrow at him. "Stark... go fuck yourself."

Not that he hadn't been patient with her while she pulled herself together. But it was the principle of the thing.

"Hey!"

"Or I could report your sexual harassment to Cap."

Stark made a terrible face, and she hid a smile. "I'll be good."

Natasha doubted it, but she threw him out, cleaned up, and went to the deck anyway. One of the viewports was overlaid with two screens -- one was Jormungandr's energy signature, so familiar in its coils that sometimes she saw it behind her eyelids, and the other was a camera following something with dark hair, blending further and further into the colour of the water as it delved. "That's Loki?"

"That's what a frost giant looks like, apparently," Cap said from behind her, wiping spray off his shoulders. "Hello, Agent."

"Hi, Cap." Natasha sat down and crossed her ankles. Steve wouldn't sit down unless she did and she wasn't a fan of standing up right now. "Aren't they supposed to be ugly?"

Stark ambled up next to her, carrying something alcoholic. Her grouchy mood lifted a little at the smell of grenadine. "Yeah, guess Thor's biased. Who'd've thought?"

She considered the screen. "Huh. Well, if he survives it's useful."
"I hate that word," Stark muttered.

It took another four minutes before he was too deep to be visible on camera, and another before he appeared in the range of the energy sensor.

Stark cursed beside her and scurried to his workstation. "Whoa. Jarvis -- Jarvis -- he's colder than the water? But there's too much pressure for ice."

"At least we know where he is," she said.

Cap folded his arms. "There's Jormungandr now."

And the peaceful yellow outline cored in green flared red most of the way and began to move, writhing out of the cave and toward the blue and purple swimmer, its heartbeat picking up.

It was long, and huge, huger than she'd been told, enough that the sub was almost swallowed by waves until Jarvis steered them below, and three-quarters of it was still coiled.

It had a blunt snakes' head and it paused at the figure, who flipped, reached out an arm, and touched it.

Jormungandr pulled back, its face heating above its mouth. Scenting, was her best guess.

It was huge, enough that one nostril would've fit Loki if he curled up, but it tapped the blunt tip of its head with the yellow resonance of bone against Loki's arm, so delicate it was astounding from something so massive.

And there was a sound, low and shaking the sub and happy and the figure -- Loki -- grew to three times his size and wrapped himself around its jaw as it writhed on itself, wrapping the figure close against its skin.

"I'm not crying, shut up," Stark said.

He was a terrible liar.

Loki's throat heated to a paler purple, almost pink, and soon after chirrups sounded through the camera, Jormungandr's tongue flickering red, his answer almost subsonic with bass.

"They're talking." Cap said beside her, and he was bawling unashamedly, grinning so wide her face hurt.

Natasha distributed handkerchiefs Cap's way and tissues Stark's way and if she took one for herself they were both wise enough not to say anything.

The next two hours were excruciating to watch.

Jormungandr never entirely left his cave. The dullness of the last third of his body, revealed now that some of the confusing overlay had been lifted, had her suspecting he'd found the cave a long time ago and so grown into it his body was paralysed by his own weight. It was amazing Stark's tools could pick up the tiny flashes of energy at all.

But that didn't seem to matter to Jormungandr, talking constantly to his mother and batting Loki with his nose, then surging to catch him in the crook where his neck tapered to his body.

Natasha didn't know their words; it wasn't a human language, and not one she'd ever have the opportunity to learn.
But she didn't have to know. More than once Jormungandr weaved himself around Loki and made a bubbling, surging noise that sounded like laughter, and more than once Loki transformed into something long and thin and coiled himself around Jormungandr, bodies sliding together and heads nuzzling.

He never maintained it for long but Jormungandr merely batted at him again, pushing him against his coils and rubbing his chin over his body almost as if he was preening Loki, checking him the way chimpanzees groomed one another.

"Seriously, I'm not crying." Then: "Manly tears, got it?"

"Of course, Stark."

He blew his nose. "Fuck you."

If she'd thought watching them play and talk for the first time in centuries was excruciating, it was nothing compared to the way Loki's entire body heat flinched after Jarvis announced it had been three hours and he would summon Loki now, sir.

It was nothing compared to watching Loki leave, swimming up with unhappy chirrups and Jormungandr unspooling to follow, nipping him in distress.

Eventually they showed up on the camera, Loki blue and Jormungandr black with enormous yellow-green eyes almost exactly like Loki's.

On and on Jormungandr followed, and over and over Loki stopped to pat him and chirrup again, until they were a thousand feet below and Loki started to throw magic, huge purple bolts that made Jormungandr squeal and force her to put her hands over her ears.

Still he continued, unsuccessfully dodging and stretching up after his mother, until Loki said something that made Jormungandr flinch back three hundred feet, head swaying confusion.

"He knows Loki's coming back, right?"

Cap made a hurt noise. "Would you believe it?"

Loki said something again that made him reach back to bump Loki up, and Loki flashed into pale skin and ears, saying something again and patting his nose, then kicked up as Jormungandr boosted him again.

When Loki reached the sub and pulled himself up out of the camera's view Jormungandr made a low noise and sank down, coiling back on himself and pausing every few hundred feet, sniffing the water for minutes at a time until he was awake in his cave again, calling out and pausing for an answer that couldn't come.

Natasha turned away and went top.

Loki was sprawled naked on the hull, staring into the sky, skin already blistering.

She came to a stop next to him, unwilling to speak first.

"Am I not lucky, Agent? My son yet lives. He remembers me. I am terribly fortunate." Loki keened. "I do not feel it. How I do not feel it. He asks where I am and whence I will return, if I love him still, and I cannot go to him."
Natasha crouched delicately and took his hand, unsurprised that it was wet and freezing cold.

He looked up at her, devastated, and she was reminded of Sao Paulo and the girl she'd befriended and strangled in her bedroom, who looked at her with the same eyes, mouth open in a confession Natasha never let her make.

She was reminded of Clint asking how many agents he'd killed, and of herself naming Piotr, and the bruises Loki's machinations gave her.

Loki shut his eyes, words slow and horrified with discovery. "I don't want to die."

"I know," she said, and let him freeze the back of her glove with tears until his blisters began to weep plasma. "Let's get you out of the sun."
"Sir."

"What?" Tony looked up and jumped about three feet. "Don't fucking DO THAT."

Loki raised an eyebrow from the other side of the workstation, the human-friendly equations of his present to Selvig casting shadows. "You are inattentive."

"Yeah, I'm concentrating, I don't know if you know what that means, and you've got little cat feet, so stop it. Make some noise. Jesus."

"I hear tell of an instrument. The tuba?" He made helpful hand motions.

"God, no. No, just -- just, like, wave. Are you above waving? Here, try with me, practice. Waaaaaave." He waggled his fingers. Nothing from Loki. "Oh, come on. Look, I'm shit at sympathy --"

"Then refrain. I have had quite enough sentiment from your Captain. He is cloying."

Tony made a face. "Yeah, that's -- yeah. A bit. He gets like that, you learn to put up with it. I just tell him to fuck off, but everybody tells me that's rude. What the hell are you doing here? I'm pretty sure I said nobody to come in."

Loki glanced around, pointedly lingering, then turned back to him and raised an eyebrow.

Yeah, okay, so it was a bit filthy and most of the stuff was dented, so what? It worked, it worked out fine, and he had Jarvis, and that accounted for like 80% of everything. The rest was just details and an array of spanners. "It's mine," Tony said defensively. "Get your own before you go all judgeyface. Oh, and get out."

Loki ignored him. "You clearly do not abide by cleanliness."

Tony glared and waved a spanner at him. "Anybody ever tell you you're a judgemental little shit?"

"Frequently."

"Well, they're right. Now that you've had your chance to piss me off, what do you want?"

Loki frowned. "Respite. From your Captain. He cries. For me. It is irritating."


He'd just got a good rhythm going with the soldering iron when Loki made something explode.

"I said don't TOUCH ANYTHING."
"I'm not," Loki said, and Tony looked, and yeah, he was using magic.

Cheater.

"Fine, if you want to play it that way, don't MOVE anything. You know what, go ... I dunno, go disassemble that shit on the table over there, okay? Have fun. Whatever. Get Jarvis to help you."

Surprisingly, Loki did go, and was quiet.

Tony gave it about two seconds' thought before he lost himself in his work, murmuring notes and slowly piecing together a makeshift frame.

"Tony, have you seen --"

"OH MY GOD WHAT NOW."

Steve glared. "Have you seen Loki?"

Tony pointed with the iron. "Your left."

Then he looked himself, and napping on top of a broken-down glove might be kind of ridiculously cute, but Loki'd probably move wrong and break his face in his sleep or something.

Steve sighed. "I was worried."

"No shit, I'm a genius." Tony pushed back from the table, waving to get Jarvis out of the way. "You can't -- Steve, back off a bit, okay? He's hiding from you because you keep being sad at him. He doesn't get it, empathy is for suckers or something. Okay? Lay off the baby blues. Don't pity him, he's allergic. Feel sorry for Jorgy. You'll get more traction."

"Did Jormungandr go to sleep?"


Steve crept forward, eyeing the workshop like everything was going to spring up and bite him, and sat on a stool. "It's strange for me too."

"Yeah. I mean, he was bugfuck. I still think he's bugfuck, you know, a crappy childhood doesn't make it any less obvious. But I guess if you have the kind of dad that lets you go off to get molested by a giant of the same race that everybody hates and that's actually saner than most anything else your dad comes up with, destroying planets? Not above pay grade." Tony made a face. "Oh, God, what if she was his mum?"

"Tony," and Steve had his face so squinched up his eyes almost shut. "Tony, don't ... don't do that."

He handed him a mug. "Sorry, sorry, my brain, you know, it -- it goes places. Bottoms up." He clinked and drained his.

"Is this a ... hot toddy?" Steve looked incredulous. "There's a child in the room."

Tony stared. "Molested by a giant, hello? Alcohol is like ... zilch on the wrong scale. Maybe a five. Out of like a million. I don't get how we're still having this argument. I mean, why -- why is it so important?"

"Just because you grew up drunk doesn't mean everyone else did, Tony." The steel of his mug
creaked. "Just because it was normal when and where I grew up doesn't mean it's normal now, and I'm glad it isn't. Don't bring it down."

Well, that one almost scored a hit. "I'm sorry, this is your business how? This isn't Brooklyn, I'm not a rum-runner, and if you're going to go on about Howard again --"

"No! No. I just ... he doesn't need your example."

Tony flashed a grin. "Cap, nobody needs my example. I'm a terrible influence and proud of it. Drink up. Tell me you couldn't use a little warming comfort."

He waited until Steve actually had a drink or two before he started talking again. Way too serious stuff to say to sober people.

"I wasn't much better when I was fourteen, okay? I've been down this road. Yeah, I'm a terrible influence. Because the alternative is that he doesn't see any way to change and still revel in being a glorious asshole, and ends up killing everybody so nobody can play the poor-little-mite game ever again. Let's not do that. Let's just not."

Steve sighed at him. Tony sighed again. "I just worry. He's angry enough as it is. Giving him alcohol won't help."

"I know. But seriously -- I can't believe I'm saying this, why are you making me say this -- trust him a little. I've totally just doomed us all, but whatever, what's a little doom for the Avengers." He rolled his eyes. "Come on, he's a diva. If he kills us he'll do it off Empire State and webcast on youtube, not in our sleep."

"Is your hand on fire?" blurred from the corner.

Tony yelped and smacked it out. "Okay, just so you know, fuck you."

There was a sleepy giggle. "It seems you have other concerns."

"Yeah, you know what your concern is right now? You got metal marks on your face."

Loki scowled and rubbed his cheek. "You have metal in your chest."

"Uh, yeah, nice stating the obvious."

"Stop it. How are you feeling, Loki?" Good old Steve.

Loki smiled. It was horrific. "Rather as though I've been disembowelled again," smooth and polite. "How do you fare?"

"You know you can just skip the snarling and tell him to fuck off, right?"

His gaze swung to Tony. Even with his face crumpled and sleepy and the sleeves of his shirt rucked up to his elbows, he was scary enough to make Tony almost reconsider being a douche. Almost.

Nothing like being Tony Stark to toughen anyone against scary faces. It just wasn't going to ever be as good as Pepper's, not that he would tell Loki that.

"I'm glad to hear you're all right," Steve said, in probably the best diplomatic move the sub had ever seen. "Would you like something to eat?"

Loki got up, smoothing his clothes and rubbing his cheek again. Point for Tony. "Immediately."
"Me too," Tony said, discovering that, okay, yes, a diet of alcohol didn't actually translate. He kept having to relearn that, it was ridiculous. Or maybe he learned and forgot every time he passed out drunk. That was a better theory.

The sub kitchen was ridiculously cheerful, like the manifestation of Steve's personality, and he gingerly took a seat next to Loki as Steve practically had an orgasm over Tony's broccoli and proceeded to do ... something ... to it. Like cooking, but with more smiling and no chef hat.

Steve gave them orange juice, of course, he was just that stereotypical, and Tony desperately wished for vodka. OJ wasn't too bad on its own though.

Loki was hilarious to watch, sitting on the edge of his chair and surveying Steve like he was going to turn around and scythe off his precious hair if Loki didn't move fast enough.

"Okay, seriously, what's your problem? This problem," tapping the table.

"He cooks," Loki said, and tipped his head to Steve like there was anyone else cooking in about a thousand square kilometers. "Why?"

"He's Steve," Tony said. "And completely fucking cray-cray. Just go with it."

"I like cooking," Steve contributed.

Tony pointed and leaned in to whisper conspiratorially. "See what I mean about crazy? Go with it."

He turned around and huffed, wiping his hands on his apron, dear gods he was wearing an actual apron. Sometimes Steve was just -- kittens. He was happy kittens. "Some of us enjoy doing things with our own hands."

"Engineer," Tony said, waggling his fingers. "Pretty sure I earned this muck."

Steve inspected him critically. "Tony, that's not good for you. You should wash your hands."

"Oh, my God."

Loki sniggered next to him, the ungrateful little brat.

"You too, Loki, what on earth were you up to?"

Tony felt like pointing and laughing when Loki started sulking. "On Asgard --"

"This isn't Asgard," Steve said, perfectly pleasant, but he had the glint in his eyes that said he wouldn't take arguments. "Wash your hands, please."

Steve was like the world's politest battering ram, really. Only harder to destroy.

"Come on, Frosty, bathroom."

So of course Loki took a shit, because that was apparently something people did in front of other people.

It was foul.

"I'm ventilating the place," Tony told him, holding his nose and spraying enough air freshener to kill a horse, "and you're holding it until you can dump in toilets that aren't my problem."
Loki coughed and waved away the spray. "That's foul."

"So is your shit, oh my god, what is that, assguns? Smoke bombs? Are you carrying -- oh, god, I can't even talk now, bye," and he closed the door behind him, grimacing.

At least his hands were clean. Apparently when Loki's plumbing got going, it got going.

Disgusting.

Steve wrinkled his nose when Tony came in. "What's that?"

"Loki. I don't wanna talk about it."

Then Steve put coffee in front of him, because Steve was also the nicest indestructible polite battering ram ever and Tony kind of loved him a little. In a manly way. A manly not-sexy way. Tony just wasn't into January-December romances. There were performance issues. Not uncommon, but definitely to be avoided.

Jarvis told him Loki was still shitting and apparently not up to anything, even with the magic filters they'd worked out. He told Jarvis to triple-check everything Loki touched or even got near but still nothing. It was almost disappointing.

Tony slurped coffee and got his face stuck in the mug, which was about par for the course lately.

It didn't help that Loki smelled fresh as a daisy while Tony still had the horror clinging to the back of his throat.

"I hate everything," Tony said when he got his face free.

Loki nodded. "An appropriate attitude."

"I don't like you."

"Also appropriate," but it came slower, and Tony sighed.

"At least it's an upgrade from hating you head to toe and your stupid smirky face? And! I haven't mentioned the window in like twenty four hours. This is me mentioning the window, by the way. That you threw me out of when we were having a perfectly civil conversation."

"You were threatening me."

"You had the blue stick of destiny."

"You were drunk."

"You were tripping on your goddamn ego!"

"Oh, and you weren't?"

"Well, YOU thought it was a damn good replacement for your ego --"

"No, you only have yourself to blame --"

"You two behave or I swear I will haul you both out and drop you in the ocean myself."

Tony blinked at Steve, then at Loki and back again, and decided temporarily faking meekness was
the best plan of action. "Um, okay. I'll just ... um, more coffee?"

Steve poured him some, all smiles again.

"Maybe you're secretly evil," Tony said.

"Maybe I'm just not as patient as you think I am."

"Perhaps you're very irritating," and seriously, Loki had no call to be that condescending.

"Oh, I know," Tony said, smug.

There was a smack to the back of his head that could only be Romanova, and he clutched his scalp and gave her his best grin.

"Agent!"

She was impeccably dressed as usual, but she looked ... vaguely red-rimmed, and Tony got in a moment of squinting before she glared some more and bent over to get the OJ. Tony leaned forward, sipping his juice.

She had a great ass.

Loki was glaring at him, something disturbed in the press of his jaw, and Tony blinked. "What?"

And now Romanova was in on it too, but she was bristling, and he didn't get what the fucking problem was --

He looked at Loki again and saw that jaw.

Oh.

Oh, hell. Ogling someone in front of Loki given what he knew about him -- yeah, that was tactless. Shit. Fuck. Curse word curse word whatever, the point was, fuck.

"I --"

And he cut himself off, because thaaaaat was another Thor trap, as he'd started thinking of them. They usually started with 'X deserved' or 'I couldn't help ...' and ended up at 'wow if I think about hearing this from the point of view of a repeated child rape victim I'm actually an irredeemable scumbag'. Thinking about it from the point of view that he'd just been ogling one was even worse. Starting from the premise of 'they were fucking KIDS the FIRST time' kind of nixed Tony's usual bullshit.

Tony ended up on a way too heartfelt "Sorry" and hoped it worked. He wasn't usually that much of a douchebag.

Loki nodded, but it was stiff, and he'd withdrawn a little.

It wasn't often that Tony felt like a heel for checking out gorgeous women -- come on, it was Romanova, she made other gorgeous women look like fresh-faced girls next door -- but right now he did.

Seriously, how was this even his life?

Tony wasn't supposed to be in a position to think about this shit to start with.
Coffee was safe. Safer. There was no telling what Barton did to the coffee he made to make it that fucking strong, but whatever it was Tony had seriously considered proposing to it just so he could vibrate out of his bones every morning.

"Oh, hey, do you like coffee?"

Loki shook his head and took the plate Steve handed him. "I'm not overly fond of addiction."

Tony made an outraged noise. That just couldn't be let go. But it was hard to keep up outrage when he had smiley-face pancakes staring up at him with ridiculously tasty-looking mushrooms heaped at one side, so he ended up whining instead. "A cup won't kill you."

"Still, I prefer to avoid it."

"They don't have coffee on Asgard, do they?" Romanova asked, settling across from Loki with her own plate, and ouch, yeah, that made sense if Loki was still convinced they'd be tossing him back.

But even if they didn't he'd outlive them all and then what?

That was if this big bad whoever didn't blow them off the map first.

God, his head was a depressing place lately.

He was a fucking futurist and the futurist said to fix that shit, so he would. Somehow. After breakfast.

Loki ate four platefuls and only the boniness of him stopped Tony from asking if he had a hollow leg in case he got huffy and stopped.

But when he had the chance Loki spoke first, bright and serious and sad. "Thanos is not to be spoken of on an empty belly, or in the dark. Only here and now will I tell you of him."

"Okay," Tony said, because something that scared Loki that badly was worth being a little agreeable. "Hit me."

He gave a strange, strange smile. "There is no other way; this is forbidden to my tongue. I apologise."

"Whu --"

Loki backhanded him, and the last thing Tony saw was the magic trailing his fingers.

"I am sorry."
Chapter 30

The only thing that stopped Steve from flinging the frying pan was Loki's haunted determination as he stumbled off his stool and held his ground, hands out and twitching on high alert.

He knew that expression. He wore it almost every day.

Steve set down the pan but kept his grip, and watched Loki swallow, his eyes flickering between the two of them. "What did you do?"

Romanova was bent over Tony, pulling open his eyelid, gun still held level with Loki's head. "Looks like he's dreaming. Explaining would be a good start."

Loki got a stubborn set to his mouth that in Steve's experience never boded well for anyone who wore it, be they horse or human. All heart, no sense.

"There was no other way."

"To do what?"

Loki swallowed again, still glancing between them, and said nothing.

Really, Steve was patient, but not when Tony's eye flickered wild and unseeing under Romanova's thumb like he was trapped in nightmares.

"You just attacked Tony, and put him under some sort of spell, and he is one of my best friends in the world. I don't like it when people hurt my friends. This isn't the time to be cryptic."

"I gave him my experiences of Thanos. I cannot speak of it, but he may. You will need aid against him when --"

Loki broke off and pressed a hand to his mouth, doubling over, and Romanova waved at Steve to do something about it. So he did.

Turned out dragging Loki to the sink was a good idea. Watching a god vomit blood and recognisable bits of mushroom wasn't something he'd ever expected to do, but in the way of everything lately it was also very familiar.

"You can't tell us?" Nod. "Is that what you meant before you hit him?" Nod. "Tony can tell us when he wakes up?" Nod. "Do you know when?" Headshake. "Soon?" Nod, but it was uncertain.

Steve resisted the urge to shake him.

"Could he die?"

Nod.

He did shake him, a little, before he got a grip on his temper. "Sorry. I'm sorry. Did you mean for him to die?"

Headshake, and another attempt to speak that ended with Loki clutching the sink and making miserable noises.

"Okay." Well, that ... tore it, really. "All right, sit back down. Don't try to talk." Steve shoved a
bucket in his hands and guided him around the table. "I'll clean this up and make some more food. Romanova, can you get Tony somewhere more comfortable -"

Tony started to scream, writhing against the tabletop and managing to knock off half their plates before Romanova had him restrained on the floor.

Loki looked guilty, but also vindicated.

"Is there anything you can tell us?" Steve said, pointed, when Tony had settled into ragged sobbing. "Is he in pain? Is it physical?"

"Yes," Loki rasped. "To look upon Thanos is to suffer."

"And you decided putting it into his head was the best way of doing things?"

"How else?"

Steve pinched his forehead. "Perhaps by speaking to us first."

Loki blinked and wiped his chin, leaning against the counter. "You would not have agreed."

He was about to ask more questions, but sighed as he saw Loki start to gag again. "Look, I don't know if you're doing that on purpose or not now, but either way, I really -- I'm ... rather disappointed in you at the moment."

"That is not my concern." He bared bloody teeth. "He made a deal for my time with my son. Knowledge of Thanos was part of it."

Steve sighed. "I know. But you could have been gentler."

"How so, Captain? To be gentler would be to give nothing at all. To know of Thanos is to know of pain. The only way to have that knowledge is to know pain. Do you say I do not have honour?"

puffing up like a scalded cat.

"I'm grateful you decided to share your knowledge with us," Steve said. "I don't like that you didn't tell us you had to hurt him to do it."

Loki blinked, and apparently it was genuine incomprehension this time. "He issued an invitation."

"No -- oh. *Hit me.* Of course. "That's a ... it's a metaphor. It's not literal."

Loki shrugged, far too at ease with the situation for Steve's taste. "Regardless, it is done."

"Cap, he's not waking up." Romanova got up, pinning Tony with a foot to his back. "You could have killed him."

"I still might," tone so nondescript that Steve had to breathe deeply to control his temper. "I may kill all of you."

"That's unfortunate," Steve said, more calmly than he felt. "If you kill me I can't make you any more breakfast, now can I?"

Loki glared. "Are you patronising me?"

"I'm disappointed," he corrected. "What can you tell us about what's going to happen to Tony? Everything you can without throwing up, please."
"He'll experience selected recollections," Loki said sulkily. "There are not many."

"And you can't talk about this directly? You have to put it in his head?"

"Yes."

Romanova still had the gun levelled. "You put the memories of a god -- you -- in Stark's head?"

"Clearly."

"Loki, did -- did Thanos torture you?"

The face Loki made as he gagged back blood, mouth contorting as he tried to reply, was answer enough.

"Tell me why I shouldn't shoot you."

Loki shrugged and swallowed it down. "It won't matter to me if you do. It will matter a great deal to your continued survival if you don't."

"Antagonising her isn't helping. Romanova, lower your gun. Loki, Tony's been tortured before, okay? It's not... it's not a good thing you did."

"I wasn't aware I was meant to perform acts of goodwill, Captain." His smile was ironic. "You forget to whom you speak. It is to your own detriment."

Steve sighed. "We were doing quite well, I thought."

"You were complacent," Loki hissed.

Romanova moved away from Tony, gun still steady, and took Steve's position at the stove as Steve went to check Tony himself.

Not good. Pale, sweating, clammy, and the reactor was humming too fast and too unsteadily. His eyes were still twitching back and forth, wide with some kind of horror, but even getting Jarvis to recite him the weather didn't wake him.

"We need Tony, Loki. You need Tony."

"I need no-one," Loki muttered, folding his arms. "Mortal wretches."

Romanova didn't sound at all impressed. "The same mortal wretches that let you see your son again."

"I would have found him myself!"

Steve saw Loki advance on her and got to his feet, trying to watch Tony and back up Romanova simultaneously.

"I did not need your assistance. You were merely convenient. You mean nothing to me, you and your pathetic, sentimental lot. You know nothing of honour, and you know nothing of me. What have you? Tales told by spiteful men and a handful of tears to twist you to my advantage. It has worked so well, has it not, on your soft, petty hearts? So sympathetic to a wronged child. Poor Loki, so sad, so neglected. I am not a child, you asinine little --"

"One step closer," Romanova said, "and I will shoot you."
He sneered and stepped forward, slowly, insolently. "As if you would bring yourself to--"

She shot him, bullet tearing through muscle and bone to lodge in the wall amid spatter, and reloaded.

Loki staggered, clutching his shoulder. "How dare you, you filthy--"

Romanova's voice was steady as her gun. "One more word from you and I'll shoot you again."

To Steve's amazement he pinched his lips between his teeth and picked his way to a counter, leaning against it and making soft, angry noises under his breath that weren't quite words as he pressed his hand to the wound. It began to glow purple, and soon the skin under the bloody rags around it was smooth and clear.

Loki made to speak, but met her eyes and hesitated. The silence was long and painful until she tightened her mouth and lowered the gun. "You can talk now."

"I am not a child," Loki said.

"Experience doesn't make you stop being young, Loki," Steve said, cautiously moving closer and signalling Romanova to watch Tony. "It's how old you are."

That earned him a scoff and a protective hunch of his shoulders, but Loki wasn't lashing out or flinching yet, so he took another step and went on.

"You gone through more than I can imagine, and you're smarter than me, but you're still young. You said yourself, you're not old enough to take care of children in Asgard. But you've got children, and Jormungandr, he's amazing. I'm glad you got to meet again. But you're not -- you're not the only one responsible for him. You shouldn't be."

"Because I can't handle it?" a savage growl, and Loki lifted a hand, magic thrumming around his fingers. "I could show you what I've handled. Do you want that?"

Steve sighed and stopped several paces away. "I don't doubt that you can handle it. I disagree that you should have to."

Loki looked very suspicious. "You are not my friend."

"No," Steve said, because to say anything else would be a boldfaced lie. "I'm not. I'm someone that's responsible for your well-being as long as you're here."

"You need not cling to your precious duty," Loki spat. "I know well what you think of me."

He shrugged, and spread empty hands, not missing the way Loki examined them then looked back up at him. "You're unpleasant. You've killed so many people just because you could and my skin wants to crawl away when I think about it. You're unforgiveable. No matter what you do you can't ever make up for what you've done. Ever. You don't even want to try." Steve set his face in hard lines. "That doesn't change the fact that you got a raw deal. That doesn't change the fact that you're in our care. You care about your honour, right? Well, think about it like this: doing my best by the people I'm charged to take care of is my honour. So why don't you come sit down?"

Loki was stock-still and wide-eyed, and Steve turned, slowly and surely, to show him his back as he went to Tony.

"He's not comatose," Romanova said, fingertips just below the arc reactor. "I don't know how scrambled his head is, but he's physically okay. Maybe a concussion."
"We'll see when he wakes up. Do you need help getting him back to his room?"

She raised an eyebrow and easily lifted Tony onto her shoulders. "I'll be fine." She nodded to Loki. "Watch him."

For lack of anything better to do Steve went to the counter and started cleaning up, running the water and scrubbing, and he didn't stop when he felt Loki come to stand ghost-cold at his shoulder.

"You know nothing."

Steve tipped his head, not daring to look back at Loki. Turning to him was probably the worst thing he could do right now. He'd shown him his back; now was the time to trust him with it. "I know there's things no-one deserves."

Fingertips prickled cold against his back, and Steve made sure his movements were smooth in case he accidentally shook him off. Loki hadn't reached out to him before, not really.

"The soldier. The man out of time," Loki tasting the names so slowly on his tongue they became something else, heavy and ominous.

Steve remembered Stuttgart, and a brave old man, and Loki, tall and mad and golden, so strong Steve's fists fell soft as quilting against leather. A whisper to kneel, to allow everything he'd seen to matter so much less, to believe in a greater good and in Loki somehow being the benevolent conqueror of that good.

"Tell me what you saw."

He smiled. Loki would be the first person he'd tell about this, maybe the last. It felt appropriate somehow. "Despair. I saw despair."

"Do you still?"

Steve drew in a slow breath, letting his hands still where they would. "Always."

There was a chuckle from behind him, the press of a soft, scarred mouth to his ear. A hand settled on his arm, pale against his tan. The fingers were long and peculiarly crooked. "What hope is there for Loki?"

Steve shook his head. "I can't tell you that."

Fingers clenched, hard and cold as frostbite. "Tell me. You have a purpose for me. There is a purpose behind this. I know it. What is it? Tell me."

"I can't tell you something I don't have," he said, as gently as he could. "That's something for you to figure out. It's -- it's part of growing up, you know? Figuring it out."

Loki made a disgusted noise. "I already know."

Steve turned his head just a little. "Why would that person, that evil, merciless tyrant, care about a son they'd lost years ago?"

"Perhaps it's a reminder. Having a little fun. The good old days," laden with sarcasm.

"Or maybe," prying his fingers off his arm and reaching for the pan to scrub it, "you know what it's like to be forgotten."
"You speak of despair and you still know nothing. You speak of hope and know nothing. You are an ignorant, arrogant creature to be cast to worms which know nothing of you, and your eyes will be molten from their sockets and your flesh decompose to salt and ruin, and you know nothing! I loathe you."

Steve hid a smile at his petulance. This peeved ranting with none of the earlier menace was more familiar territory. "I'm mortal. Does that mean I'm wrong?"

There was a frustrated noise. "Of course. What is the matter with you?"

"I like cooking?" he offered.

"More breakfast," Loki said, peremptory and shuffling away, and Steve could feel him scowling at the back of his head.

"Of course," he said agreeably, and sliced mushrooms. "Will you need to do what you did to Tony to someone else?"

"No. Not if he can speak of it."

"If?" Steve raised an eyebrow. "Will it stop him talking about it too?"

He laughed behind him. "Thanos is pain, mortal. Pain and eternal unmaking. He serves only the emptiness of his own hatred, and names it Death. It would take a stronger spirit than Stark's to voice it so easily."

He turned on the burner. "That's more than you could say about him before," Steve said mildly.

Loki shrugged. "I was uncertain of my reception."

"I'll say."

"You misunderstand. I do not wish danger upon Jormungandr. If that requires briefly aiding Stark in a research capacity, so be it."

"Also help if you stopped threatening people."

"Ah, but there is always someone to threaten. And --"

Another frustrated noise. That wasn't how Steve knew Loki was trying. He knew he was trying because there were no holes in his shirt where his fingers were. It would have been very, very easy to burn through it, cold as he was, cold as he was capable of being. Loki didn't.

"Stark is irritating. He knows pain well. He will survive. Beyond that, I know not."

Well, that was the best concession Steve would get, and honestly it was more than he expected.

He laid a plate in front of Loki. "Don't eat too fast or you'll be sick again."

"It is not your business," he snapped, but ate more slowly than before.
Natasha restrained Stark, took a chair to the precise place where Stark would have to strain to see her face but would see her all the same, and waited with a book, a jug of water, and Jarvis' concerned company.

None of Jarvis' reports added up to brainwashing. The aftermath of badly-done brainwashing, maybe, with the fever and delirium, but Loki wasn't that imprecise. That'd been a solid slap. It followed what he passed on was just as decisive.

Resistance to implanted memories fit the symptoms. Unfortunately Stark was so deep in it that waking him up in a fit state to accept them needed specialised tools she didn't have to hand.

It was just as well. Cap would lecture her on how to treat her teammates, and while it was amusing when it happened to others, having it done to her was a terrible prospect.

"HOLY FUCK."

She finished the page, marked her place, and got up to kick the bed. "Stop thrashing. You'll hurt yourself."

Stark was huge-eyed and deathly pale. Much like how he'd been in the later stages of palladium poisoning, actually. "Agent, pinch me. I have to know this is real. Pinch me, I swear to god, this is the only time I'll ask you to, to, OW!"

Natasha leaned against the nightstand.

"You didn't have to do it so hard. Ow. Fuck. My head. Oh, fuck, I am just not equipped for sixteen dimensions, no wonder he's fucking crazy. Oh, my God." Stark was shifting restlessly, testing the bonds, and he wasn't quite focusing on anything in the room.

"Stark." She snapped her fingers. "Concentrate."

"Fucking menace," and he flopped back onto the pillows, breathing deeply. "That little brat. God. My head. This is terrible. Jarvis! Jarvis. You're not going anywhere, are you, Agent Romanova?"

"No."

He grinned at her and sighed back into the mattress like it actually reassured him. Perhaps it did. "Well, just -- be quiet about this, don't tell anybody. Especially don't tell Cap, that would just be very bad, very very bad. I bet Fury already knows, I just have to confirm for myself. Okay, Jarvis, classified SHIELD files. Reference Erskine with, where was Selvig from, uh, Norway, and, wait, no, just ... actually, just search Norway before, uh, '45, how's that?"

She tapped her toe. "Stark, is this relevant to Thanos?"
He whimpered. It wouldn't have been so startling if he hadn't also flinched badly enough to cut into the restraints on his wrists. "I can't think about it yet, I need something else to do right now. This is a damn good something else, so if you'll stop reminding me while I get this done, we'll all be so much happier. Okay? Okay. Good job, Jarvis."

Thirty-eight files, and she bent to take a look. Ten were situational reports, six more were follow-ups, and the remaining were coded as being part of the Scientific Strategic Reserve.

"Bingo," Stark said, but he didn't sound happy. "Right. First one. March 1927. Let's take a look... whoa. Fuck, I hoped I was wrong."

Natasha's eyebrows flew to her hairline before she could bring them down.

The screen showed a grainy still image of an unconscious creature, three times as tall as the men surrounding it with harpoons, half-slumped in a block of ice.

It was blue, and its skin was whorled.

"You suspected this?"

Stark sighed. "Yeah. Who else do we know can survive deep-sea pressure and breathe in water that fucking cold?"

Natasha bent to inspect it. "The markings are different. This is a triangle on its face, not a circle like Loki's."

"Yeah. It's obviously someone else. Jarvis, did they do any tests?"

Further files unfolded, and the long and short of them was the original team had given up after a few preliminary tests and put it in nitrogen deep freeze and apparently forgot about it until it was rediscovered by HYDRA buying out the lab in 1938.

They'd experimented so extensively, and vivisected so much, that the research team were left with a few samples and half a still-unconscious extraterrestrial in nitrogen deep-freeze in Vardø.

It'd woken up on the table once and exactly once, and after it killed six agents and destroyed three floors of labs with ice, they'd tortured it with heat lamps until it passed out, collected the peeled skin and fluids, then packed the creature into the freezer.

Natasha glanced at Stark. "Loki said he destroyed their planet."

"So either we've got one of the last Jotun in the universe locked in a freezer, or we've got one of the last Jotun locked in a freezer. Fuck. Jarvis, did Erskine have access to the samples?"

Three more files appeared, this time of transferred employment, and they matched the dates she remembered of Erskine's flight to the US. The center file was of his supervisory position at the same lab as the experimentation, as well as his access to the same storage areas.

Two more files, one a copy of Erskine's declared luggage on that flight, and the other a stocktake of the lab in September 1944.

All of the samples were missing, but the original storage unit they put the Jotun in was marked as present.

"Jarvis, is it -- fuck, is it still there?"
There was a long silence, and Jarvis said: "I believe so, sir."

Natasha folded her arms and leaned against the wall, glad of the support. "We can't do anything about this right now."

"Yeah. Yeah, I ... how would we even start explaining? I just -- you know, I had a hunch. Loki's fucking cold, you know that? But Steve touches him and he's just fine. No frostbite, nothing freezing. And he was in ice for seventy years and nothing doing."

She added up what he said and what he wasn't saying. "You think Cap took on Jotun traits from the serum."

"Yeah. Yeah, it'd explain the muscles and the superstrength, wouldn't it? And considering all that, something about all this doesn't sit right with me. Like, shit, never say this to Thor, okay? Never. If you do, it didn't come from me. But -- are we sure they're monsters? Like, really sure? Because Steve's -- Steve."

"Cap's recruitment was unusual." They had to figure this out enough to satisfy Stark before either of them saw anyone else, or it wouldn't stay a secret for long.

"By Erskine, yeah. Um, something about spirit or whatever. What if it takes a really strong person to deal with the Jotun side-effects? A personality type or whatever."

Natasha called up files on Red Skull. "He was a megalomaniac. It worsened after his injection."

"It takes what you already are and then makes you ... more?" quizzical. "Wait, no -- no, that's not right. Steve was a skinny little thing. He wanted to join up, right, but that doesn't make anyone stay in service. Weren't we all expecting him to just hide in the basement forever?"

"Cap's loyal," she said, picking at Stark's train of thought. Not quite reinforcing, not quite discouraging. "He came for the mission."

"And orders. He, he got really huffy at me and Bruce about following orders, but he went and checked out the Phase 2 weapons even though he practically hated both of us already. He could've just waited for Jarvis, but it was too slow. So, not orders, or not-not orders, but something." Stark was clicking his fingers, frowning. "I'm missing something. What am I missing?"

Natasha sighed. "He's a soldier, Stark. Soldiers are about trust."

"Fuck, that's it. He's loyal, he's devoted, he's always been that way, right? He's staying exactly the same. It's not that it doesn't make you more, it doesn't matter if it does anyway, because it stops you changing. Or, or it's slower. A lot slower. Steve never changed. He saw all that shit with HYDRA and he didn't fucking change. You could talk to skinny-ass Steve and I bet you my entire fucking tower it'd be just a few cents off talking to Steve now."

"Asgard lives long lives. And Loki's development was delayed like the rest of Asgard, even though he's Jotun." She pushed herself off the wall. "If the rate of emotional development is anything similar, Cap is still as old as he was when he had the serum."

Stark groaned. "Awake in the ice or not, it doesn't make a damn bit of difference then, does it? A little, but he was what, eighteen? Jarvis, how old was Steve when he got recruited?"

"Nineteen, sir."

"Fantastic. That's -- that's great. Think you can let me out of these now, Agent Romanova?"
She undid them and handed him water. "What does this change, Stark?"

"Nothing. Everything. I don't know. Something, anyway. I could reproduce it, you know. But I like testing shit on myself, and that's -- I'm not the sort of person anyone wants taking a serum like that." He wobbled, but stood and dusted himself off. "So that's that for that. Agent, don't -- don't mention this. Any of it. It never happened."

"I understand," she said.

He squinted, then shivered dramatically. "I believe you when you say that. Look, I'll tell Steve. Eventually. Not right now, because if he's going to freak out he's not doing it on my sub, thanks, but I will. God. We're totally going to end up rescuing it to soothe Steve's moral outrage or whatever, aren't we?" miserable.

"Most likely." Natasha raised an eyebrow, deliberately steering him away from the door. "So, Thanos?"

As she suspected, Stark was briefly mutinous, then sagged back onto the bed, hands dangling between his knees. "I can't make myself tell Cap about him. Not right now. I mean, I can the Jotun stuff, eventually. Just not this. But you knew that, right?"

"I guessed," she said, and dragged her chair to sit across from him, folding her arms across the back. Both informal and depersonalising, which was what this would most likely require. "What did he give you?"

"I don't know." It sounded wrong, and she took a closer look.

Stark looked like a shredded pirate's flag. It was despair, the end of an era, the shrinking of a world.

But for people like Natasha the world was always very small.

"Thanos is an idea," Stark began, examining his fingernails. "More than a person. I mean, he's a he, and he has a body, but it's like someone opened him up and poured evil in and forgot to tell him it was a rent-only deal. He's me, at my worst. But I saw him as the worst Loki through Loki at his worst, and that, uh, that fucked me up a little. You know about this stuff, right?"

"Yes."

"How much have you lost?"

That was simple enough. "I don't know."

Truly, she didn't. Nothing about her mind was firm. It was what she did just then, what she did right now, and what she was going to do in a minute that mattered. Putting importance on things like names and histories was for people who needed them to know who they were. Natasha had her scars and the way Barton treated her like a friend no matter what mission she'd just been on, and a dossier in her own handwriting and triple-sealed by Director Fury that told her what that version of her at that particular time knew to have happened up until the mission.

Black Widow was a skillset more than a person or a name. She didn't have to remember very much to be good at it; the redundancy was built into the metaphor. Guessing what she was meant to do was always very easy.

"You don't? God, that's depressing," Stark said. "I guess it's what you grow up with. And Loki ... hoo boy did he grow up with shit. He tried to edit out as much of it as he could, but uh, now I have a
distinct memory of, uh, giving birth via internal csection because my baby has fucking claws, and it's fucking freaky. Actually, that's not even what pisses me off. You know what pisses me off?"

He pointed at her and she considered breaking his finger, but refrained for the moment.

"She left him to die. Angrybitch whoever. She left him and she came back three days later and told him he hadn't done well enough because he was bleeding too much. He was grateful she came back at all. It feels like I was the one being grateful and letting her fuck the hole in my stomach. That's just fucked up.”

Stark shuddered, and she refilled his glass, used to the way people slid away from the things planted into their minds. Closing the ledger didn't get rid of the debts. But it made it easier to circle closer. "And Thanos?"

"He's coming. Soon. Apparently we've proved ourselves worthy to die or something like that and Death is his bitch and he wants to lick her clit with our corpses or something. Can I just say -- fucked up? It was like watching A Serbian Film on repeat, totally soul-shredding and gross and fucked up. God. So fucked up." Stark groaned into his palms. "I kind of want to kill myself. I mean, I won't, come on, but I want to. Sort of."

Natasha was used to this, but it didn't mean she liked it. "If you do, do it after you give me my information."

As she predicted that made him laugh and relax. "You're cold, Agent. Cold. But yeah, uh, this is the guy that wipes out universes for fun, and he's coming for us. Earth specifically. I don't feel good about this. I don't -- I'll do my best, but seriously, I get the impression we're outgunned." Stark grimaced, "God, Fury was right. Hopelessly, hilariously outgunned. Don't tell him, don't tell anybody, I'll never live it down."

"For good reason. You're giving up?"

"No! Fuck." He looked miserable. "Maybe. I'm going to kill that kid, he had to know what it was going to do. Wait, is this what he's been dealing with the whole time? I'll give him a trophy or something and then I'll kill him with it."

Stark scrubbed at his face and gulped the glass, then pulled the blankets around himself, piling them in until he looked like the shivering core of a quilted snowman. Also typical of post-processing. It was reassuring in its banality.

"Upside is, I know what to do with Selvig now. Downside is, I don't know if I can do it in time. Bit hard, with the, the weight of it in my head. I can't think. I try and I just think about how I'm going to fail everything, and no-one will ever like me, and I'll die miserable and alone and it'll be all my fault and oh my God I sound like a fucking depressed teen, shoot me, I sound like Loki, seriously don't shoot me."

Natasha decided tact was not the best avenue. "A very severely depressed teen, and we have two of them in the kitchen. One is a mistreated god, and the other is a supersoldier by means he doesn't know about. You're not the one I'll shoot first." She tipped her head, letting him see her think about it. "Second, maybe."

"You're just full of zingers." But he was grinning at her. "And very bad at cheering me up."

"I'm not here to make you feel better, Stark."

"That? That, Agent, is the best thing I've heard all day. It's just so normal." He got up, blowing
kisses. "Bless you, Agent. Your seething competency is a service to the world. Jarvis?"

"Yes, sir?"

"We've got work to do. If I start trailing off into writing really bad poetry, smack me." He paused at the door. "One more thing. You know this Thanos guy?" Stark pulled an exaggerated disgusted face. "He's really, really ugly. You're prettier." He smirked and left.

Natasha snorted to herself and cleaned up the workstation he'd left behind, files still open in the air. Stark wouldn't know operation security if it bit him in the ass. "Jarvis?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Show me the experiment logs from the lab in Vardø."

She might not be a good physicist, but she was decent at deciphering biochemistry. The more SHIELD knew about Jotun physiology, the better prepared they would be.

And her. If anyone was to be sent to kill Loki in the end, it would be the Black Widow.

It was all in the skillset.
Explaining Thanos in short words to the entire team over StarkVoice was even less fun than it sounded.

But it was still more fun than ducking into the bathroom, tracing his stomach, and feeling the ghosts of Loki's memories. Tony felt empty in organs that were anatomically impossible.

So maybe he'd thrown up a little. Shed a few tears (from the puking). Had Jarvis cross-section him to make triple-sure that he was still the same. Had quite a few stiff drinks, because he wasn't fucking pregnant and he didn't want to be pregnant and he'd never been pregnant and he never would be because he didn't even have the equipment, for fuck's sake.

He kind of wanted to call up the male pregnancy hoax guy and punch him in the face so he'd stop fucking smiling in the pictures, the asshole.

Tony felt ... gravid, his hips wanting to splay, his stomach too heavy and too empty, and his back hurt.

It was fucking awkward.

So there were worse things so far today than explaining Thanos on conference call with the team plus Fury and Selvig, but only because he'd had a really shitty day and probably should've gone straight back to bed.

If his luck held, Loki was going to saunter in at a really awkward moment, because the kid had a sixth sense for comedic timing and telling him to keep himself occupied for an hour on the very other end of the sub wasn't going to last more than fifteen minutes before he got bored/curious/decided to act like a nosy cat/himself.

They'd swept the entire room, themselves and with Jarvis, for any signs of life that weren't person-shaped and the three of them, but paranoia only went so far.

At least Steve was laying off him about the drinking for the moment. Apparently 'big purple universe-destroyer gunning for us' was worth a beerergency.

Or six. Tony was pretty sure he was on his sixth.

"That's not ... reassuring," Bruce said once Tony was done blathering. "Uh, are you sure?"

"As sure as I can be with a live feed from Loki's brain, yeah." Tony made a face at them; Fury was unimpressed as usual, but Tony detected a certain air of concern. Maybe gratitude. He'd go with gratitude. It really was all in the eye. "How well we can trust that, I dunno, but I feel like I just had a wolfbaby."

Bruce stuttered laughter. "Oh -- you're serious."
"Uh, yeah. Trust me, I wish I wasn't." Tony made a face.

"He is," Barton said, all seriousness, and huh, that was unexpected. "I got a bit of feedback from the blue stick of destiny. Wolfbaby wasn't a nice baby."

"We made any progress on finding that kid?" Fury said, arms folded. Tony honestly wondered how he did that without busting the seams every time. "Do we assume the story is true?"

"We can assume he's tied up somewhere," Romanova said. "Jormungandr recognised Loki straight off. The others probably would as well."

"So he hasn't been let near them." Barton made that tsk-tsk noise Tony hated; it was something Pepper did. "I don't see Loki letting that stand."

"Jormungandr was paralysed. I think he would've followed him onto dry land if he could." Oh, Steve. Really, the guy was all heart. Literally. Metaphorically. He didn't actually want Steve to wear his heart on the outside.

It said something he was worried about that.

Fuck his life.

"So they'll, uh, kill themselves trying to get to him? That ... could be dangerous." He sounded envious.

Tony shrugged and cut in. They didn't need a rerun of Bruce's issues. "Better than mine, anyway. Anyway, he's up in Asgard somewhere, so finding him needs Thor or a way up there, and we don't have the Tesseract anymore -- don't give me that look, Fury," pointing at the screen. "I stand by getting it out of here. We don't need no stinking cube."

Fury really needed to take a shit or something, the guy was way constipated. "What do you suggest?"

Selvig cleared his throat. "Loki gave me some data not long ago. Between the three of us we've narrowed it down to being a way to create a portal like the one the Tesseract made. It's very different from what I did to stabilise the Tesseract, but it can work. It'll need very high-energy sources, but Stark has that covered."

"Few towers' worth of reactors should do it for about ten minutes of a portal to wherever. Upping the efficiency will squeeze it out to about twenty minutes."

"So, what, we get Thanos and punt him through the portal to Asgard?" Barton looked like he wanted one of Tony's beers. "That's ridiculous even for you."

"Hey, if you have a better idea, I'll build you an ear so you can splat it on every billboard in America."

"Let's not ... do that," Bruce said. "You'll make the churches unhappy."

"God forbid people face up to the idea we have alien gods hanging around," Tony muttered, and finished his beer just because. "I kind of want Thor to steeplejack the Assemblies of God. Can you imagine?"

"Yes," Fury said, and levelled a hard stare. "Refrain, Stark. I can and will put a lockdown on your suit."
Tony bridled and Steve started making calm-down hands. "Director, please. Surely we can come to an agreement? I really don't appreciate you threatening the integrity of my team."

Tony blinked at him, and he saw the rest of the Avengers blinking too.

Oh, look, warm fuzzies.

He opened another beer, coughing uncomfortably. "So," into the silence, "I'm not a huge weapons expert or anything, oh, wait, I am, how could I forget, and from what got stuck in my head I can tell you three things. He has more armies. He's a hell of a lot stronger. And we are the plucky underdog. And the plucky underdog always wins."

"This isn't a movie, Stark!"

Tony ignored Barton and saw Bruce sit up straighter. "You think Loki won't hinder us." Good old Bruce. He could follow Tony's thinking; it was really, really nice.

"Eh, that's optimistic, I didn't take you for the optimistic type. He's a pain in my ass. But I don't think he wants us dead, and that'll help a lot. I weaselled a promise to get research hours out of him, so if we can work on the magic stuff, blend it in with what he handed over to Selvig, do our crazy science-magic-all-the-same-on-Asgard thing, ... why not?"

"Loki doesn't want to die," Romanova said.

Tony stared. "Wow, really? I had that kid pegged for trying something, like ... two days from now or something. Jarvis, remind me to give Loki the no-suicide-on-my-sub talk, okay?"

"Noted, sir."

She shook her head and talked over Jarvis. "Whether or not he helps, Loki has a reason to stay alive and stay out of Thanos' way. If he destroys Earth, he destroys Jormungand. We can't move him, Director. The kid's huge. Jarvis estimated he's over six thousand kilometers long, and that's just what we can reliably pick up from the readings we got yesterday. He's cramped into a hole the size of Yellowstone, and he's paralysed. We can't move him."

Fury was frowning. "Paralysed? How bad are we talking here?"

"Anywhere from a third to a half of him is dead or close to it. He was hurting himself just getting his head out of the cave and I'm not sure he actually noticed. We'd have to amputate."

"Medical surgery on an alien serpent baby at eight thousand feet," Bruce said, almost musing to himself. "I've done worse."

"This is why we're science bros," Tony told him. "I can build him a prosthetic skeleton if you can grab skin to staple it. And the biomechanics, write me a paper."

"He won't quite span the planet anyway, but if he's stunted, it makes sense." Bruce shrugged. "It's doable."

"Asgard's probably a lot smaller than Earth," Selvig said. "Thor talks about a day's ride, eight days' ride. Apparently the planet isn't round, it's a disc."

"Shut it, Stark." She even pushed another beer at him. Weirdly nice of her. She was probably up to something suspicious. He'd have to get Jarvis to watch her.

"So they tossed him down here because we're bigger," Barton summarised. "Why do we always get the aliens nobody wants?"

"We're their junkyard," Steve said. "But there's a lot to be found in rich people's trash."

Tony stared. "Is this a dig at me? It is, isn't it? That's a completely unsubtle --"

"It wasn't, but now that you mention it, yes, it very well could be."

"I'll have you know --"

"Enough!" Fury was pissed off now. "Shut up. You're so bent on moving the kid, the pair of you write up a report, list at least four possible locations to move him to, five approaches, six methods of getting him out including decoys and escorts, and three approaches to surgery. I want an appendix detailing Loki's possible responses and just how stupid you think I am. If I decide it's good enough, I'll sign it. Otherwise I'll trash it until further notice."

Tony protested, of course he had to protest. "We're not writing that!"

"Then you're not moving him, are you? He's not SHIELD's priority. Doctor Banner, Doctor Selvig. Your progress with Loki's data?"

Selvig sighed. "I'll be happier when Stark's back. The physics of it is much more complicated than my work on the Tesseract. I was building a scaffold. This is replicating part of its functionality."

"Yeah, we can modify it, but it's like, I dunno, crutches. We're going to be building prostheses that'll fart portals on command. You've seen what we're working with, right? Jarvis, show them."

"It's kinda, uh, trippy. Like making LSD in grad school."

"Hope you're not admitting to anything, Doctor Banner."

"Uh, no, director. No. Just an example."

"Ow." Barton was rubbing his eyes and blinking at the shifting text like it was giving him a headache. "Ow, don't -- don't do that. It doesn't go that way."

"Clint?" Romanova said. "Can you see something we can't?"

Tony waved the screen out of the air. He wasn't a fan of pissing off master assassins, and giving them migraines definitely counted as pissing them off. But it made sense, didn't it? As much as anything else did. Why not get a man who'd earned being codenamed Hawkeye to help with a project so visual?

Selvig pounced, obviously thinking along the same lines. "If I could have a moment of your time in the lab to assist me with the rest?"

Barton shrugged. "Not sure how much help I'll be, doc. But sure."

"Status on Thanos' arrival, Stark?"

Tony hated thinking about it, it was sitting like a lump of rust in his head, all its parts tangled together. Thinking about one thing meant thinking about everything else, which was just ...
beeremergency. Definite beeremergency. He opened another one. Fuck the rest if they thought he was a drunk. They were right anyway. "Let's be wildly optimistic for shits and giggles and call it a year, how's that? Having the Tesseract open told him where we were, and they'll be heading for my tower. My fucking tower, by the way. I, I personally think that's unfair."

Selvig cleared his throat. "Would our magic shield work on Thanos?"

"Some. Not entirely. But hey, any little bit helps. I'm working on it, we're working on it. I mean, you two haven't been slacking off without me, right?"

Bruce made a hollow sort of noise and took off his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I wish."

Now that Tony bothered to look, Bruce did give off the kind of air of deep stress that Tony associated with Howard's explosions. It was a particular science-y frustration. He gave him a critical look. "Get some sleep, green guy."

"Shouldn't Loki have gatecrashed by now?" Bruce put his glasses back on. "It's not like he doesn't have supersonic hearing."

Tony froze.

Oh, shit, he just had a shitload of Loki's mind dumped in his head. He knew what Loki was doing, he knew, and he knew why, and fuck fuck fuck, he was probably the only person that could talk to Loki right now. "That's, that's, uh, that's a really good point. Jarvis, what's Loki doing?"

"I believe he is attempting to roast himself to death, sir."

They all exchanged looks. Fury grumbled. "One of you better attend to that."

"I thought you didn't like me leaving meetings, you have so many interesting things to brighten my day with," and at his glare he got up, finishing the bottle. "I'll be riiiiight back," he said to all of them, and hurried to the door. "No, no, let me do it. Don't talk about anything interesting. Or about me. If you say bad things about me Jarvis will know and I won't make you any quinjets." He shook his finger at them. "I know I'm fascinating, but control yourselves."

"There was no danger of that, Stark," Barton said, and shooed him with his glove hand. It was a lot less intimidating viewed through a holograph. "Go check on the kid."

Tony whistled as he sauntered his way through the sub. There was only one logical place on the sub for what Loki wanted, and sure enough, there he was in the boiler room. The air smelled like barbecue and the stupid little shit was close to singeing off all his hair, the flesh on one arm sloughed off with the other arm looking like it was thinking about being a copycat.

Unfortunately the sloughed arm was the closest, so he made ick-faces, told his stomach to behave, and tried to drag him away as gently as he could when his only grip was on bones. They were slipperier than he expected.

"Come on, come on." Loki's skin puddled on the floor, molten flesh trailing like strings of flesh glue, or maybe cheese, and now he'd ruined cheese for himself and he'd never be able to eat it again, seriously, fuck this kid, and Loki was actually fucking scowling at him, the fuck. "Come on. This is a waste of everybody's time." He slapped him, trying to snap him out of it gently as he could, and winced when the skin shifted. It was warm, which wasn't good.

The good, or maybe bad part, was that Loki wasn't dead; he was breathing very steadily, and though he'd roasted off almost all of his eyelids sticking his head in, enough of his eyes were left to let Tony
see that he really was still conscious, which was partially good and partially ... completely fucking crazy.

"Jarvis? Patch me through. Loki's fine, you guys. Just a bit melted."

The chatter that came through was really annoying. Seriously, he was saving a life here or something. "What do you mean, melted?"

"I'm telling you, he melted. Well, I mean, he crisped a bit, and then he melted. I'm handling it, it's okay." Loki stirred. "Hang on, hang on, he's listening. I'll handle it, stay out of this. Don't say anything about me!" He dismissed Jarvis and checked that he really was breathing and wasn't just an ambulatory corpse.

"You have terrible timing," croaky and raspy.

Tony glared even though Loki was probably blind right now and in horrific pain. But it was totally self-inflicted, so Tony felt justified. "I have shitty timing? You're just projecting, you know that, right? Seriously, on my sub? Are you nuts? There's better ways to get our attention. Like, I dunno, popping your head in and yelling about Barton's underwear. They're purple, aren't they, they're totally purple. Heal yourself, okay? You want Steve to see you like this? He'll lecture you until he dies."

Loki made a noise that might've been a laugh, and watching him move a skeletal hand to peel flesh back onto it was surreal, but not as surreal as watching the skin of his arm fill in and inflate with blood and muscle like a balloon.

"You know what else he'll do? He'll give you pamphlets and earnest eyes and make you see a therapist you'll scar for life. Which is why, you know, no therapists yet, because seriously, SHIELD trained ones are made of way too much money to waste on you. And I don't even think you know what a therapist is anyway."

Next was Loki's chest, then his hair and eyelids and fingernails, shiny and pink. After a moment clothes popped up too, which was a relief, because seriously, naked flies and all that.

"You're a fucking trial," Tony told him, feeling disturbingly nonchalant about the whole thing. His head was just too full of fucked up to process the horror of all this right now. After Thanos everything was tasteless and really banal, like grandpas in knee-high socks and sandals. "Can you get rid of that slop? I kinda had an aesthetic going on here."

Loki waved a hand, trailing green, and the boiler was pristine again. "Sufficient?" He sounded a lot better, presumably he'd done his throat somewhere in there.

"Yeah, thanks. Okay, you know what," levering himself down to sit against a sparkling-clean cabinet and cursing the fact that he was getting old. "Just ... stay on the floor a minute. You know, I get what this is about, I really do. You've pretty much told me, thanks for the screaming nightmares by the way, those really help. But burning your skin off in some kind of total crap attempt at, like, penance? and hoping you'll suffocate or something? Really won't change anything. We still need you, and that means you don't get to pull this shit like you can burn off the guilt or how much you hate your life or whatever. It's a crappy situation, all of this. It sucks, I hate it, you hate it, everybody hates it. Maybe not Steve, but he probably just has different reasons for hating it."

"The Captain is vulnerable," Loki said, curling up on his side and sounding like it was an observation and not a threat. Maybe it was.
Tony glanced over at him, finding the tired, lined face of someone who'd grown up wrong. Seriously, it was like a mirror sometimes, and he felt the phantom emptiness again and swallowed down bile.

He hadn't wanted to be right about where the serum came from. But the thing was, Steve. Ice. Steve and ice and deep water too cold to freeze. And watching Loki survive at depths that crushed people into toothpaste -- hell, Steve had done the same. He grew and got stronger like Loki grew and got stronger when he dived off the sub. He was strong, but it wasn't like Hulk and it wasn't like Thor. Both of them attacked and attacked and kept attacking. Loki dodged, and Steve did too.

All these little coincidental details, hanging on the idea that maybe, just maybe, if Asgard could walk around on Earth, so could the Frosties.

But Steve was still fundamentally different from Loki.

"Yeah, he is. He cares. It opens him to a lot of shit. But the thing is, everybody cares about something, even if it's just destroying everything. You're not exempt from 'everybody', by the way. You know what I think you care about?"

Loki looked sour. "Enlighten me with your miraculous insights, mortal."

He managed to laugh a little. "Weak, that was weak. But yeah, you know, I think you care about your kids, and I think you care that you've been treated really badly. I think you care about keeping your kids safe, and I think you've decided you can't do that. So you'd rather hurt yourself when you have the chance so you don't have to feel like it's all about you and how it's all your fault even though when you pull this shit you're totally making it all about you. Am I hot? Cold? Tepid? Am I even a little relevant here?"

"There may be some truth to what you say." It sounded forced, dragged out, but Loki also looked so goddamn tired Tony seriously wondered if he'd be able to get up.

"Thanks." Tony rubbed his hands together and linked them behind his head, cushioning from the warm metal. "All right, look. I don't know how much of a chance we have. I just sat through like an hour, hour and a half with Fury and everybody, lying my ass off, pretending I think we can do anything but scream when we get steamrolled. I get you're scared shitless. You showed me enough that I'm scared fucking shitless too, like, I'm, I'm totally drunk right now. I'll probably be drunk for a while, get into a funk groove, hang out in the tent until I smell really bad, invent something totally pointless. But what I said before's still true. We can't save the Earth, we'll avenge it."

Tony poked Loki with a foot just to see him curl and glare. Good, he was still listening.

“So, you know. It's not about saving it right now. I can't think about that, it's too big, it's too much. Don't repeat that." He cleared his throat. "It's about saving enough of it. The more you work with us, the better chance you have of Jormungandr being in the parts we manage to save."

Loki closed his eyes. "Is this an alliance?"

He giggled. "Hell no. Alliance is like a trust thing. I think we can agree trust is not exactly in large supply around here. It's a temporary ... what's the word? Enemy of my enemy is my friend. But we're not friends, so that doesn't work. Look, I know what got you so fucking scared now, and I agree with you, it's shit. It's complete shit, and being shit-scared? Completely fucking valid. Feeling like you fucking failed him? Also completely fucking valid. But Jorge seems like a really sweet guy, okay? I don't actually want him to die. I don't want anybody to die, but everyone will eventually. It's just a matter of who and when, and lucky me, I get to make those decisions for everybody, again,
because I'm totally the best person to do that stuff."

That got him a snort. "You mortals so easily grace your tyrants with power."

"Mhm, not arguing. Put it this way. You destroyed a world, right? Wanna help save one?"

"Not necessarily." Loki sat up and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles. "I assume I do not have a choice in the matter."

Tony shrugged. "Well, I mean the fact is, I think you want to be better than your dad when it comes to your kids. So you won't say no. Though it's actually not all that hard to be better than your dad, but, principle of the thing. It's an opportunity. Are you really not going to use it?"

He shook his head and hugged his knees. "You are taking this ... very calmly. I understood this was of some stigma on Midgard."

"Same as it is on Asgard, I bet?"

A nod, and Loki settled his chin on a kneecap, pensive. "It is most dishonourable if it is not your time. I am still useful in battle."

"If you actually think this is the first time I've walked in on people killing themselves, slashing themselves up, whatever, your ego is even more ridiculous than I thought." Tony showed his hand and patted his shin, grateful for the jeans in the way of getting frostbite. "I'm kind of an old hand at this. You have no fucking idea the people the idea the people the people I used to mess around with. Fucked up. Even more fucked up than you. But that makes me sound fucking ancient and we can't have that, so ... uh, let's call it experience. Experience says that you don't want to die. You just want to get away from the whole thing. You've ditched Thanos in my head, you've seen your kid, job's done, right? You can self-flagellate, literally, for the rest of your life? Nope. Sorry." He meant it, actually. "Life's not that easy."

"Why not?" Loki spread his hands. "I have nothing else to offer. Despite the opportunities you dangle as a reward for my good behaviour."

He considered him, then leaned forward. "Brace yourself, I'm going to say something nice about you. I want you to remember this, because it's not going to happen that often. Okay? Ready?"

Loki was tense and nervous, eyes searching Tony's face, but he nodded.

"You're really smart and you can do a shitload of cool stuff. It might be old hat to you, and Asgard might've looked at you and called you a wimp, but you know what you look like to me? You look like possibilities. You look like the future, and the future is what I'm all about. I didn't throw in the research hours so I could pick your brain about Thanos. I want to understand your magic and save the Earth and figure out why the fuck shawarma tastes so good and I bet you'd have an opinion. I can't do any of that without you. Well, I mean, I could, but I'd really rather not be in the dark here, okay? I mean, shawarma. Come on." Loki's toes were digging little dents into the floor. "Too many compliments?"

He was leaning away, head turned, breathing ragged. "Yes. Too much."

Tony shuffled back a bit, settling himself and feeling all the beer roil in his blood. "Gotcha. One more thing. You try this shit again, you're the one cleaning it up. By hand this time. No magic. You and a toothbrush. You clean up your mess."

Loki inclined his head, still staring into the distance. "That seems fair."
"Good, 'cause it is. I'm shit at feelings, so."

"Is that something you tell yourself as a balm to soothe your inevitable failures?"

Tony lifted a finger, then paused. "Yes. Yes, actually. You know what? It goddamn works."

That made Loki smile. Tony was kind of glad to see it. "Mortals. So invested in your delusions."

"No, I'm Tony fucking Stark and I'm the one bankrolling them." He pointed. "Don't forget it."

"Unlikely," Loki murmured. "I suppose you know little enough of honour that my attempt is merely a footnote to your tragic history."

Tony glared, squeaking with outrage. "It's a footnote because you threw me out of my window! I couldn't think less of you if you jerked off a hatchetfish!"

"You will not release that grudge, will you?" Loki laughed, throwing back his head and rocking on his heels. He looked so young, and Tony smiled along, feeling very, very old.

Loki might not understand his near-success, blithely overconfident in the end in his magic and Asgard-Jotun-whatever bodies surviving everything thrown at them, but Tony sure as hell knew and it chilled the weighty emptiness resting on his thighs.

The world needed Loki, and they'd come so close to losing him to himself. Tony knew a bit more of how much he hurt and why, but it didn't tell him anything about how to keep Loki alive.
Chapter 33

Clint watched Fury's twitching with a certain amount of foreboding.

"The hell is wrong with Stark?"

"Loki wasn't very careful splicing up the memories of Thanos. Some of the others got mixed in," Nat said. "I suspect a little of Loki's personality, as well. They're both suicidal right now."

"How serious are we talking, Agent?"

She wobbled a hand. "Not very."

"If you're wrong, Miss Romanova, it could be catastrophic for us. For the world," Selvig said, leaning forward, earnest and serious. Definitely Clint's favourite. Not so much because he liked SHIELD -- the guys tolerated them -- but because sometimes Clint felt the two of them were the only sensible ones. Nat only counted sometimes, but he loved her anyway.

Banner smiled at the tabletop and sometimes Clint wondered if Banner thought he could kill with his eyes or something. "Yeah, I, uh, I haven't known Tony all that long, but uh, he's scared."

"That was obvious," Clint said, but he kinda wanted to frown too. Seeing Stark that rattled was ... weird. "He hasn't gone through that much beer since before the Initiative started."

Nat nodded on the screen. "I was with Stark when he woke up. His actions matched to resisting forcible implantation of memory. We can't know yet how much of it fragmented."

"What she means is," because sometimes Clint had to translate from Nat's SHIELD-ese. He thought sometimes she liked to maintain the image of being superior in a team of superheroes, "the more the fake memories break up, the more likely it is they'll be incorporated into Stark's."

Nat nodded. "In the end it's very difficult to tell what's implanted and what's original. Given the severity of his response to these memories, Stark's functionality will be affected."

Cap spoke up. It surprised Clint; the guy was so quiet lately, especially when they talked over each other. Good at interrupting when on-point, not so good otherwise. He got the impression he was actually shy, which was a fucking weird trait for Captain America. "Is there a chance Tony will be okay?"

God. Nat was giving him the go-on face. Fine, make him the bad guy. She couldn't afford to be the bad guy right now, but still. "Not so much, Cap. Eventually, sure. Right now? The guy's compromised to shit."

Fury was tapping his fingers. "How compromised, Agent Romanova?"

"Very. If he was one of our agents, I'd recommend at least three months off-field processing." Clint saw Nat sigh, and didn't like it. She was saying one thing but she meant another, and he was pretty sure he and Fury were the only ones who could pick up on it. It wasn't even the word 'compromised'.

Compromised could mean a lot, anything from subverted to dead to altering mission parameters on the fly and explaining later, and it was a watchword more than anything. It meant there was a situation that had to be dealt with, and fast, and the agent in question was either a liability or about to become one. Coulson had been really good at inflecting it just right to tell them which version and
how serious it was.

Everything about her body language right now said Stark had been lying his ass off about pretty much everything, up to and including their chances of survival. If that was true, no wonder the dude was rattled -- he hadn't exactly been positive to start with. But just lies didn't matter that much; it was the way Nat shifted in her chair and folded her arms across the back of her seat.

That meant Stark wasn't just compromised, he was a giant goddamn millstone around their necks, and she was taking over to stop it from sinking the boat.

He half-heard Banner mutter about what exactly 'off-field processing meant', and saw Selvig lean into an argument over priorities of which figuring out agency terms didn't include, and Cap fidget, something frayed about the cant of his shoulders.

He saw Fury nod to her. Message received and approved.

On the one hand it was good they had an assassin in place and prepared to kill either Stark and Loki or both. On the other hand it meant Stark was so much of a goddamn mess that Cap was probably going to be too distracted to handle Loki the special Cap way.

So Nat was solo in the middle of a bunch of compromised consultants. Again. God, Budapest.

"ETA four hours," she said, and Clint saw her shift her hand in the universal I-need-a-goddamn-drink sign. Yeah, he'd totally buy her a break when she got back, even if he had to stand guard outside her door to do it.

"Noted, Agent. The jet will be at the docks. Anything else before we wrap this up?"

Cap cleared his throat. "What will you, uh, tell the council?"

Fury made a contemptuous noise. "Them? Nothing. All we've got is Stark's a goddamn loose cannon. Old news. Thanos is new, but until we dig up more information we're barking at shadows. I'm not taking that to the council if I don't have to. Don't make me have to."

Selvig looked very unhappy. "Director, with all due respect, I'm not sure you understand the magnitude of the situation --"

"I understand just fine, Doctor Selvig. There's something more powerful than us out there and we're a target. I repeat, old news. Thor dropping by was a hell of a wakeup call, and you lot decided to skip the Tesseract off to Asgard. That's on all of you."

Banner raised a hand halfway from the table. "Uh, you want us to fight this Thanos guy? I thought I was going to, uh, R&D mostly."

"What, you thought Manhattan was a goddamn PR stunt? No, Doctor Banner. You're not done." Fury glanced around at all of them. "None of you are done. You shut down Phase 2. That was a stupidass decision. Unfortunately for you we have to live with it. If you've got ideas that aren't assembling, I'm goddamn listening."

Selvig rose to the invitation. "We could use the new portal to contact Asgard. See if they can bring somebody down to help us."

"That ain't a precedent I'm interested in, doctor. Asgard's got damn screwy ideas. If it's Thor, I don't care. He's part of the Initiative, we've got Loki, we can control him. But can you guarantee it won't be a battalion of screwy ideas coming down with him?"
"No." He grimaced. "Maybe if we sent someone through to Asgard? An ambassador?"

Clint had to step in at that. "Do we even know if we can breathe in Asgard?"

"Say we do. How are they getting back, doctor?"

"Well, if they use the Tesseract --"

"Got a guarantee on that?"

Selvig sighed defeat. "No."

"We're full of bad ideas around here, doctor. I got nothing against bad ideas. The Initiative was a bad goddamn idea. But it worked. Yours won't work. Either you fix them or we keep waiting for Thor. Anything else?"

The table was silent, the only noise the humming of the sub's engines over the feed.

"Agent Romanova, keep Stark drunk off his ass until he gets back here. I want him off-balance, I want you digging in his head, and I want Jarvis locking down weapons specs. You hear me, Jarvis?"

"I am aware of your words, sir. However, I am bound to obey Mr Stark."

"Put it this way: if he doesn't ask for them, don't show them. That work?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Captain, keep a lid on Loki 'til we get him back in the cage. No roasting on your watch, you hear me?"

"Yes, sir." Cap straightened, visibly easing at having something to do. Soldiers were more trouble than they were worth, to Clint. These days it was worse, but 1940s army didn't discourage independent thought. If Cap hadn't a decent streak of disobedience they'd have lost spectacularly and ended up with Loki as king for real.

"Selvig, can you bind a full magic shield to something like bracelets?"

Clint saw him and Banner look at each other. "We can't ourselves, but we can source materials and draw up specs for Tony to, uh, do his thing."

"Nick, we don't have the engineering expertise." Nick. Selvig was the only person he'd ever heard dare call Fury Nick.

"Do what you can. I don't trust those cuffs are working like they should if he can slap Stark with that shit."

"They aren't," Nat said. "Stark estimated Loki's got about sixty percent of his function back. He's overloading them."

Fury pointed at Selvig. "Fix that. Barton, I want you assisting Selvig and Banner. Then you're shipping out to the docks backing up Romanova. Anything wrong when they surface, start shooting."

Well, he had been itching to try out the guided missile arrows. "Yessir."

"Dismissed."
Fury rubbed at the strap of his eyepatch like he had a headache, and Clint really didn't blame him, only hung around very nearby being competent and reliable until Fury let out a slow breath and nodded the only thanks Clint would ever get.

Selvig and Banner were talking science already, mumbo-jumbo flying fast and so furious he could see the spit trails. Great eyesight had its downsides.

Clint stayed out of the way, trailing them and thumbing his quiver. He'd have to restock it for the missile arrows and change up the release delay. All doable so long as he left in time to catch the SHIELD jet. They had a mission out that way anyway, something about the wrong mobster getting in where he shouldn't in Eastern Europe. The former USSR was a good place to sink or swim trainees and really, they weren't much better than Asgard that way. Probably worse. It was a fucked up world.

Agents always appreciated superiors hitching a ride. Clint liked it too, even if he always ended up giving up advice that finished off with 'and don't think you can do something your gut says you can't, just get the fuck out, assess the situation, and try again'.

Number one cause of death for promising young agents, that. Failing to get the fuck out. It was hard to relate to them sometimes. They were all so bitter and bloodthirsty and puppyish and sure they were doing the right thing. Honour patriotism honour terrorists good of the nation state of the union all hail the president blah blah puke it didn't fucking matter. Recruiting out of the other agencies sometimes fixed it, but in general it was a better idea to grab independents and ex-agents and give them a reason to fold in. They were more equipped to handle it all.

The trainees would learn or die, but he wouldn't stick around to watch them do it. More important things to handle for Agent Barton, ten years service with SHIELD and eight years an independent contractor before that, Director Fury's right-hand man in the field.

Like stopping Selvig and Banner from coming to blows over some particle or something. "Hey, hey, take it easy," coming with hands up to stand near them. Still out of the way of the spit missiles, though. "What's the matter?"

"Professional disagreement," Selvig said.

Banner was smiling, hands stuck in his pockets. "More like, uh, we've got different ... credentials. It's -- it's a thing, an academic thing. Uh --"

Clint snorted. "Didn't go to college, Banner. Didn't finish school either. Don't worry about my delicate fee-fees."

That got him much blinking and if one of them said but you're so smart, he was going to shoot them and to hell with Fury executing him afterwards.

"Right. Well. It's, uh, different subject areas think about the same thing, a lot of the time, but it's ... uh, different approaches."

"Like you see a box over there, but Nat would see a weapon, potential cover or a hindrance first off, and I'm hanging out reading the label."

Banner blinked and shifted his glasses up and down his nose. "Really? You can read that?"

"Stark Industries #30-49-928, yup. It's a part for one of the quinjet engines."

"How good is your eyesight?" Selvig said, examining him.
"Better than yours," Clint said, and he was fine with grinning about it, because seriously, it was
damn ridiculous. The best part was it'd degenerated over the years as he got older and flashbangs and
explosions did their damage and he was still the best shot in the world. Counting ants as a kid was
fucking boring and the circus lamps were hell. "I'm a freak, doc."

Banner cleared his throat, obviously oversensitive to the freak thing. Good head on him when he
wasn't green, but he could lighten up a little. "Anyway, uh, it is like that. It's indoctrinated, a little. So
we ... argue. About interpretations. A lot."

Selvig shook his head. "We're colleagues and we've heard of each other's work, but collaborating
isn't easy. I thought he was dead," he said to Clint, and Clint cocked his head to show he was
listening. "SHIELD made off with him like jackbooted thugs and no-one heard from him again. Ah-
- no offense."

Clint smirked. "As a jackboot thug, none taken."

He had the grace to look embarrassed. Clint patted his shoulder.

"Yeah, uh, I was ..." Banner made a face, meandering at his side like he couldn't quite keep a straight
line.

It fit with the reports. Shifting back and forth probably temporarily damaged his central nervous
system as everything adjusted. Weird that it took so long, though. Clint made a note to self to
investigate the weapons the Chitauri used, see if there wasn't something they hadn't found the first
three times. Probably nothing, but worth a look. The Initiative was a shit team. But it was his team,
he was stuck with them, and with Thanos on the horizon he was going to do this thing if it killed
him.

"I was upset. And kind of green. Uh, it was upsetting."

"No doubt," Selvig said, with that blend of sympathy and practicality Nat had in spades and Clint
never managed to tune quite right. "It's a relief that you're alive."

Banner smiled like that hurt. "Yeah, uh, that's ... thanks."

Selvig nodded and they walked for a while. The desert was bright, but fortunately Clint had his
sunglasses and his clothes resisted the heat pretty well. He was careful to step where the others did,
hiding his tracks in theirs without really thinking about it.

The tent was science heaven or something, machines and a blender and tall wooden stools that just
looked weird among all the metal.

"So, the screwy mind's eye thing?"

The stools were surprisingly comfortable, and he perched on one, letting his eyes do the work for
him. It was easy, really, once he got over the nausea of everything looking wrong, of being told he
was seeing six things instead of two. But there were layers under layers, and he ran Banner and
Selvig ragged prying them apart, converting the lines of words into something they could use.

Eventually they had twenty-eight separate equations floating in the air and only one thing was left
hanging where Jarvis put the original scan, dust motes dancing through it. It was heavy to Clint's eye,
flat and strange after the dynamism of the others.

He absently tried a cipher, then a few more, as the science dudes exclaimed and ran around and
made happy noises.
Eventually he told Jarvis to input a series of specific SHIELD classified codes, ones Clint discarded after being mojoed, and the words resolved.

Hello, Agent Barton. Do you remember what real power feels like?

I do.

The words he'd picked out began to spin, shaking back and forth like they were laughing. The science dudes didn't notice. Clint was the only one who could see them. He was the only one, and there was no time.

Clint grabbed Selvig and Banner and dragged them out of the lab as the words started to whirl on one another, writhing like the videos of Loki's magic tests, and he flung them to the ground behind the swell of sand dug out to ground the tent and threw himself on top of them as something enormous and hissing and angry spiked the Geiger counter in Banner's pocket to a wail and flared into the sky in a great, giant green maw.

It collapsed back and the counter stopped screeching.

"Agent Barton, report!" Hill. Bless.

"It was boobytrapped, ma'am," rolling off the doctors and leaning his chin against his shirt to activate the comm. "Life signs see anything?"

"No," she said, sounding frustrated, and he heard clicks in her background, the tick of infrared.
"Nothing. We're running deep radiation signatures now." Clint waited, watching as Banner and Selvig dusted themselves off and sat blearily, covered with sand and watching Clint right back.
"They got a reading. No radiation. We're not picking up anything we know to be harmful."

He listened, signing off with promises to be careful, and got to his feet. "Something in there's got a signature like the Tesseract." Clint licked the air, disliking how greasy it felt, how much it buzzed. "It doesn't feel like the cube, though."

"I think I'll just, uh, stay here. Uh, I'll keep the," Banner gestured to his shoulder, head bowed. "Let me know, or something."

Selvig clapped his shoulder. "You just take it easy."

It was almost like old times, if old times meant 'mojoed by Loki'. It probably did, actually, and Clint stifled a laugh as they approached, Selvig solid beside him. A levelheaded civilian. Who knew.

"Let's see," Selvig murmured, drawing aside the flap, and Clint scanned the inside, bow drawn.

Nothing. The words weren't floating anymore, back into being a sheet of words that somehow moved completely differently than they had before, and they gave off the impression of being annoyingly smug.

Magic. God.

And under them was a glove.

Clint blinked, stepping inside, and Selvig poked his head in behind him. "What is that?"

It was golden, probably made of gold, set with ridiculously expensive-looking jewels that glittered in way too many angles like the one in the mojo stick, and two of the sockets were empty.
And it wasn't doing anything. It wasn't moving on its own, it wasn't opening doors to new and exciting alien armies bent on death, it wasn't mojoing anything. It was just sitting there. Being golden. And a glove.

"Hell if I know. Loki left a message before it started exploding. Something about real power. Think it has to do with Thanos?"

Selvig looked like he wanted to travel back to a time when he wasn't dealing with any of this shit. Clint really, really sympathised. "Possibly. It's ... it would be very Loki, to boobytrap it."

"Yeah." They watched the glove for a minute, and it still didn't move. Clint felt ridiculous holding the bow on it. "What do you wanna do?"

"I don't want to wear it, if that's what you're asking. It won't fit, anyway." Selvig sized it with his hands in the air. "That's not made for a human."

"Think Loki stole it?"

They exchanged looks.

"Of course he did," they said in unison.

Clint's mouth twitched without his permission. "Want to bet it's Thanos' and he wants it back?"

Selvig snorted next to him, and soon they were stumbling out of the tent, collapsing in laughter, and the sight of Banner poking his head above the sand and staring at them just made them laugh harder.

"Loki, you douchebag," Clint said, and really, doomng them to some universal scumbag's pissy vengeance over a golden glove that looked like it'd seen better days shouldn't have been so funny, but it was just so ...

A glove.

A fucking glove.

They were all going to die over a fucking antique glove.

Selvig was making wheezy noises next to him. "I don't think thermonuclear astrophysics can help you with that. Maybe an appraiser?"

"Five bucks, tops," Clint said, and that set them off again.

"Are you crazy?" Banner said, standing at a safe distance and looking like he actually wasn't sure.

"No!" Selvig wiped tears from his cheeks, sighing. "Yes. Yes, we are."

"Oh, yeah. I have to tell Fury. I have to -- to tell --"

Clint flopped into the sand, bubbling with hysteria, and thumbed his comm. "Director Fury? I got news."

"What the fuck, Agent Barton?" loud over the comm. "Want to tell me what the fuck that was about?" There was a pause. "Why the fuck are you laughing?"

Selvig dissolved into giggles again and Clint gasped in a breath. "Know anything about polishing antiques, sir?"
Steve hadn't known that breakdowns were called spiritual awakenings now, but Tony told him that was the modern term before he locked himself in his workshop and Jarvis refused to let him in.

A few hours until they got back. He should be sleeping, or even resting if he couldn't manage sleep, but lying awake thinking wasn't something he particularly wanted to do. Punching bags were a good alternative and it was thoughtful of Tony to set up a miniature gym room with several of them lying around. There was a note, too, that these had been specially reinforced, and if he tried them out that'd be great.

Tony didn't like being kind, Steve had noticed. It always got turned into a favour for himself. Fortunately for Tony Steve had practice in deciphering backhanded kindnesses. Life raiding HYDRA bases had a way of stripping off the deep embarrassments to make room for little gruff ones, and while there were people who couldn't give anything without making it a backhanded insult -- Loki, for example -- the gift and the insult were always two different things.

Steve really didn't want to think about Loki right now, and he steadied the bag, readying himself for another round. It lasted a lot longer than the other ones, something different about the way it rolled on its hook.

"You have beautiful physiology."

He almost got whapped by a rebound before he managed to steady it with a hand, chills crawling down his neck. "What?"

"I apologise, sir," Jarvis said. "I announced his arrival."

"It's all right." Steve turned around.

Loki advanced, footsteps soft and deliberate. He walked like Tony's models, one foot in front of another, and Steve hadn't liked the fakeness of it on video and he didn't like it now. There wasn't a catwalk, or an audience. Except Steve, maybe. But Steve doubted Loki considered him worth that kind of deliberation. "I can't compliment a mortal?"

Steve flushed, steadying the bag and very disturbed by the turn of the conversation. "Are you -- are you -- flirting with me?"

He circled Steve and stopped on the other side of the bag, grin amused, tongue peeking between his teeth, and folded his hands behind his back. "I do it because it bothers you," cheerfully blithe.

"That's not a very good reason," Steve said, starting another round.

Loki tipped his head, watching, and Steve got through two more bouts before he gestured to the bag. "Does it help?"
Steve sighed and steadied the bag again. "I want it to."

"But it doesn't," frowning and inquisitive.

"It helps me not think," Steve said, rolling his shoulders. He felt like he was a bug pinned in one of those boxes. He felt like he was back in the machine with a roomful of people watching him, half-hoping Steve would die and half-hoping Howard would succeed. He felt like he was being cased in ice, and he swatted the back of his neck to check. "Are you doing that?"

Bright and innocent: "Doing what?"

Steve grit his teeth, shifting uncomfortably, wishing he could unbend enough to brush the crawling chill off his arms, sweat turning cold and weighting his feet. "Please stop it." He did brush off his arms, then, and he took a step back, unwrapping gauze and examining bloody knuckles. Steve was afraid to touch them in case his blood was cold.

Loki looked startled, then he actually frowned and stepped around the bag, steadying it with the press of a finger. "Captain, I'm not doing anything. I swear to you, your disturbance is not of my making." He wrinkled his nose, somehow terribly earnest. "Rest assured my manipulations would be much more to my benefit."

So it wasn't Loki, it was Steve's head. That felt a bit like a punch. Just Steve being Steve, making things up again.

The 107th calling him Rembrandt was a friendlier way of saying it but the sentiment was the same as his mother's, stroking his hair when she came back filthy from the steel factory with hessian tucked into her shirt and blue eyes bright in her face, bringing him flat pencils she rescued from visiting drafters once they were worn to stubs. You've too much imagination, Stevie. You'll come all over trouble one day.

"Oh." He mustered a smile and sank onto the bench, starting on the other hand. It took a lot to cushion his hands. Director Fury suggested gloves, but that felt like it was making it all a bit too official, like it was something he needed to do. Not something he just did once in a while. More than once in a while. "I guess I'm tired."

Loki came to stand a little away from him. "And yet you do not sleep. Is it that it does not exhaust you?"

Steve looked up at him, honestly confused, and hoped he wouldn't regret asking. "Like what?"

Loki made considering faces. "I hear tell you also have a tradition of sparring."

"You want to fight me?" Steve blurted. "Again? That's -- uh -- I don't know. Are you sure?"

"You should be much more concerned for yourself." Loki lifted an eyebrow. "I am far stronger than you."

"Yeah, you pack a wallop." He got up, flexing his hands, and he accidentally brushed his knuckles, something in him relaxing when he scratched a little and his blood was warm under his scabs. Okay. Okay. Even if he felt cold, he was warm on the inside. He wasn't thawing anymore. That was good to know. "What are the rules on Asgard?"

"No rules," Loki said, stepping back and spreading his hands. He was barefoot and it should have been ridiculous to contemplate going hand-to-hand with him, but he'd had a bruise on the back of his shoulder for a good long while that said not to judge Loki by his cover. "It is impolite to kill your
opponent if it is not to the death. But there are often accidents."

Steve shook his head. "I bet you got a lot of accidents."

"Yes. Someday I shall tell you of a brother long dead. Perhaps I shall tell it now. Would you hear it?"

"I wouldn't mind." Steve worried his bottom lip, but didn't take it back, even when Loki raised an eyebrow at him, clearly waiting for him to. "Is it -- is it very disturbing?"

Loki smiled broadly. "No. Not as much as you have heard. You should like this tale. It paints me in a rather unflattering light."

Steve returned it, chill settling to something manageable as he got up and took position opposite him. "I won't try to seriously hurt you if you don't seriously hurt me. Uh, if we do get hurt, let's stop and take stock of whether we can keep going, all right? Um, no magic other than healing. Jarvis will referee."

That got considering noises. "Acceptable. You may strike first," he added, dancing back on his feet, "if I do not. You will listen as we spar?"

"Sure, if you have the breath," and Steve lunged. Was he doing this? He was.

Loki stepped nimbly out of the way, which Steve was expecting, but he didn't expect to be countered with the chain. Easily solved, though, and Steve sprang to his feet, sizing him up. He moved like a long-to-medium range fighter, defensive rather than offensive in close quarters, which was as much as Steve expected. The hissing was a little startling, though.

"Don't underestimate me." Loki struck out, forcing him back a step, and Steve dodged and fell into attacking from Loki's left, trying to gauge if he really was that ambidextrous. Thor had a definite tendency to work with his right side forward, left side back, but Loki switched it up more often than not.

"Just trying to get your measure."

"Ha! Try as you will. Where was I in my tale ... ah. Thor does not speak of him, nor does anyone. Baldr, his name was. He was beautiful to look upon. You are very alike. His disgrace was his arrogance and my, the All-Mother's, confidence no-one would dare strike at something so beautiful."

"But you did." Feint, feint, backstep, forward, kick, cross, feint, feint, cross caught and flipping him onto his back, and he rolled back to his feet as Loki advanced. Steve hadn't been this hard-pressed since -- well, since the last time they'd fought, and that had been so much shorter than this. The Chitauri were more a problem of numbers, not strength.

"Yes, I did," unrepentant, and chains twisted around his wrist, dragged him in range of Loki's knee in his kidneys. Slip, twist, sweep. Loki staggered, and he shifted to follow through and found himself on his knees. From there it was easy to rock forward and use the chain as leverage, his boot ungentle against Loki's knee, his elbow in his throat. It was like the lessons from Peggy -- push, push, push. Fire twice, not once. Follow through. Finish it. "I killed him."

He stumbled, his jab diverted, and Loki twisted his hand back on itself, Steve wincing pain and sliding a foot between Loki's to break his stance, a little rattled by such an easy admission. "Your brother?"

"Odin's son," Loki said, in the way of mildly interesting clarification. Steve decided that tone meant
exactly as much as taking the tips of icebergs at face value did. "There was a flaw in Frigga's plans. A rather glaring flaw. It was begging to become useful. A spear of mistletoe, a blind man, Baldr preaching his beauty as usual and the court throwing all manner of things to test his invincibility. Simple enough."

"That's, ah. He sounds --" Steve snapped the side of his hand into Loki’s side and bodychecked him into falling left, not very surprised when Loki turned on a dime and swung a leg up to kick Steve in the throat. He dodged, but it was close. "He sounds a bit much. Did he really preach?"

Loki manoeuvred them so they were face to face, pulling back enough so Steve could see him grimace, the wry light there. "My description may be unfair, but a very little. Baldr was rarely contradicted in his ways."

"Sounds annoying," Steve said, taking a blow to his back and feinting. "Was he nice to you? I mean, did you like him?"

He shrugged and whirled out of the way. "After a fashion. He was rarely allowed indulgences that might ruin his beauty. It lent him a measure of understanding."

Loki had sharp little fists, and avoiding them was something of a priority if he didn't want to have his throat crushed. But Loki's kicks were stronger, designed to twist Steve into a finish, and he was pressed for breath. "So you killed him because you could?"

"I do not regret his death," very clear. Steve had the wind knocked out of him as Loki threw him across the room and stalked closer. Roll, spring, shift, and he was tossed to the floor. Loki bared his teeth when Steve got in a hit, and it gave him room to push to his feet as Loki backed away, inviting him forward with a crook of his finger. "I do not regret murder. What other reason for death but opportunity? Fate is cruel. To pretend the end is not a matter of chance is immeasurable delusion."

Steve thought about Bucky, and HYDRA, and his flurry of kicks was harder than he intended, ending with Loki flung into a wall and springing off it. His fist did catch his throat this time, and it hurt really quite a lot, forcing him to gasp as he caught his waist and shoulder and bent him backwards in readiness for a move that, used on anyone else, would crush his spine. He thought perhaps Loki appreciated not being handled with care.

"I'm not sure about delusion," he said, scrambling as Loki almost broke his elbow and followed through with a shove to the floor that made his head spin. Loki hung back, breathing hard, cheekbone scraped, and Steve took a moment to breathe, checking his forearms to make sure they weren't broken. "I think people want control, mostly. If they do it right, maybe they die a better way."

Loki offered a hand, breathing hard and eager. It was an attitude he remembered from training, recruits slowly getting used to what their bodies could do, the moments of joy at their own capability. "Are you not aware? There is no good death, Captain."

"Yeah, I'm aware." Steve took it and let himself be hauled to his feet, retreating and flexing his knees. He smiled back; he could not, but he also could and let it stand in the face of saying anything like Asgard has a lot to answer for if you think you're a terrible fighter, so he did exactly that.

The thing was, Loki hit hard. That was for sure. But he wasn't striking to kill, and grappling was as much testing their abilities as it was fighting in itself. It was a sharp contrast to Thor, who barely stopped himself from crushing people to their knees when he patted their shoulders, pulling people off their feet when he helped them up. He held things like papers and hands just fine when he was supporting them, but it was as though the weight of his approval forced everything else down and
off-balance if he didn't keep it tightly in check, didn't flick up his wrists just that little bit.

"You are distracted," Loki noted, and Steve barely managed to backstep and slap his hand away.

"I'm thinking about Thor."

Eyebrows up. "Oh?" all sly insinuation.

"Not like that," Steve said, flushing.

Loki tried to break his knee and Steve returned the favour with a one-three combo that had Loki trying to kick the back of Steve's head and barely missing. His smile gleamed. "I said nothing."

Steve sighed and flipped them, kicking Loki off and away and slamming the base of his hand into the back of his heel. Loki hissed and kicked him, recoiling back almost faster than Steve could react, and for a few moments they were locked, straining for the upper hand. Loki's greater strength mattered a lot less if he couldn't get leverage. "Mostly I get the impression he hasn't been allowed to think about other people all that much."

That got him a very intense stare that Steve blinked at, uncomfortable at being so frankly assessed. "What?"

"Your phrasing is both insightful and correct," Loki said, and threw him, rolling to his feet. "And thus unexpected."

"I'm full of surprises," Steve said, thinking of a box, and Howard, and Erskine.

"You lack adaptability," Loki chided, and proceeded to demonstrate in a flurry of moves Steve had never seen before, barely countering and failing on the sixth poke to his solar plexus, gasping to lie on his stomach on the floor. "Come now. Rise."

Steve went to take the bag off the hook and put it against the wall, jogging back to just out of arm's reach. "More room. Was that an Asgard thing? I haven't seen it before."

Loki twitched a smile. "No. It was taught to me by Hogun. One of the Warriors Three, as they call themselves. He is not of Asgard either, though he has learned their ways."

The words said one thing, the tone another. "Has he really?"

Loki rolled his eyes. "He needs Thor to think he has."

"Tony has a phrase," attack, block, and he could see it now, but he couldn't quite -- there, and he intercepted, getting a nasty scrape and Loki's knee for his trouble. Steve squeezed and yanked, but it didn't quite work and he rolled away to avoid his head being popped off his shoulders by Loki's shins. "'Assimilate or die'. I think he meant it as a joke, but I'm not ever really sure with Tony. He told me after Thor -- after we took you from the tower. He wanted shawarma but he'd forgotten where it was, so he wanted Jarvis to tell him. I thought it would be more reasonable to walk in that direction, but apparently not. So he said that. I ... I don't like it very much. The phrase."

"It is cruel," Loki said, almost sounding gentle as he knocked Steve off his feet and Steve used the opening to shove him back a few steps, following with an uppercut. Loki caught his arm and bent it back, Steve shifting his weight to keep stance. "Truths often are."

Steve squinted at him, headbutted his ribs, and took a moment to pant as Loki recovered his balance. "You think it's true?"
"If you prefer to name it an inevitability, do so. The substance remains."

He grinned at his knees and sat back on his heels, wiping blood off his lips. Still hot, still warm, and he wasn't cold at all, heart running high, muscles loose. It had been so long since he'd had a challenge. Too long, really. Did Thor feel like that? Steve supposed he must. "I guess you'd know a little something about how assimilation works, huh?"

"I do indeed." Loki cocked his head, forehead wrinkling.

Steve wasn't inclined to interrupt him when he was thinking; Tony didn't take all that well to it either. He did gesture him down, though, asking a break, and Loki nodded.

"Thor's nature is a force from above," words tightly clipped as he squatted, balancing on the balls of his feet. His forearms, laid loosely over his thighs, were as blade-like as his shins. The overall picture was of something poised to spring and rip out a convenient throat. "The passing wake of such forces disturbs all, as it must, and to care for others introduces possibilities which cannot be forgiven. He was gifted with the surety of love, and in acting upon it and disobeying our father's," hissing, and he shook his head. "Odin's wishes, it was squandered."

Steve took a bottle of water and tossed Loki one, sprawling on the floor again. The cold of it was a relief now, and that was a relief too, gratitude stacked on gratitude. He was tired, and it felt okay to let himself be dragged into sleepiness. "Are you talking about when he was banished?"

Loki's mouth quirked. "Yes. I had no idea he would be banished for his actions. Reprimanded, perhaps. Odin is old, and much tired; his loathing is a weak thing, and thus reserved for me. That Thor thrived here was also unexpected. Jane Foster is not a tolerant woman."

"Doctor Selvig's said a little about her. She sounds like a bit of a pistol."

"An appropriate idiom, as I have not heard Thor destroy a single cup. Such newfound reserve would be the work of no other."

Steve blinked. "You sound jealous."

"Perhaps so, perhaps not." A shrug. "She softened him. He cannot do so. It is not his duty to indulge mortals in their manners. Neither is it in his ability. Odin shall forbid further weakening."

"So he's not coming back?"

Loki sighed. "I cannot say. He is ... fond ... of your Avengers. It is a novelty, and he is given to pursue novelties. Whether he will defy Odin's edict once again is the concern."

"Damned if he does, damned if he doesn't?" Steve said wryly. "Sounds familiar."

"Does it not?" Loki chuckled. "Thank you," whispered with a stiff nod. "For this. And refraining, with the pan. The effect would have been disagreeable."

"You're welcome. May I thank you too? Or is that not ... I don't know, may I?"

Loki scoffed. "If you must."

"Well, thank you." Steve sat up. "There aren't a lot of people I can fight without having to worry about hurting too much. It's probably not the same for you, but ah, it was fun. I wouldn't mind doing it again, actually. Thank you."
"You would not?" He looked so puzzled Steve had to bite back reassurances.

"I'll figure something out when we get back, so we can if you'd like."

"That will not be so easily arranged, I fear." He chuckled, draining the bottle. "Not easily at all."

Steve eyed him warily. "What'd you do now?"

He smiled mysteriously and rose, inclining his head. "If you have but the dregs of wisdom left you will sleep when you can, Captain. Farewell."

"Cap, please report to the bridge." Agent Romanova. She sounded serious. What was going on?

Loki chuckled, very pointedly smug, and gestured to the door with a raised eyebrow. "Well? Go."

"If you've hurt anyone," Steve said as he passed.

"Oh, no. Quite the opposite. I am not named a trickster for nothing, you see."
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

More glove shenanigans. I still love Selvig. But not as much as I love all of you! It's been so thrilling to read all your comments. :D Thank you so much!

He didn't even mind that Selvig couldn't smile at him, couldn't bring himself to really be friendly. In a way he was glad about it because it meant Selvig's principles were as staid and stubborn as ever. Bruce liked people with principles that meant they disliked him for his fucking stupidity with the serum, people that recognised just how fucking stupid he'd been in taking a mostly-untested prototype and dared to hold it against him. Tony forgave him; Selvig didn't.

It made passing the time in the backup lab talking to a brainwashing expert in his 'natural environment' while SHIELD's departments were trying to figure out exactly what was so important about the glove a lot more bearable.

Selvig wasn't happy, of course, and neither was Bruce. His skin still tingled with something that wasn't quite the other guy but wasn't anything else either, something nagging and incomplete, and it was driving him crazy.

Crazy was not a good look on Bruce. Ever.

Going back to the tents didn't help the crazy.

They both had to take breaks from the glove now that they were allowed to work near it. It'd been investigated and examined and declared 'we don't know if it's safe, but we're glad you've got the Hulk nearby in case' by about ten thousand researchers trooping back and forth with equipment. Nobody dared to move it until Tony got back, and putting it on was unanimously declared a very, very bad idea. They'd all heard stories of evil sentient gloves.

But there was still something so wrong about it. Not wrong enough to make him give up the primary equipment, but wrong all the same.

Bruce agreed with Selvig that the glove wasn't alive; it didn't respond in any of their known spectrums to basic things like light, heat, dark, radiation, etc. But it felt like it could be mindful, if only it had a certain something, and in a great many ways that was much more worrying.

There was just something wrong with the thing. It stood there, jewelled and in dire, dire need of a spit and polish, and there was something wrong with it. It affected the world around it in bizarre, unexpected ways. Bruce could balance ten pens next to it when otherwise he could only balance three without the instability of the ground toppling them, and he and Selvig played poker next to it and they both won. With one deck of cards. They'd slowly dragged the card table away from it until the ... whatever effect ... collapsed into a sulking pile of paper, and the six-metre distance matched up to SHIELD's observations.

There was a lot wrong with it. Bruce would call it an eldritch abomination, but that was probably reading too much Lovecraft in undergrad when he should've been sleeping even if Lovecraft felt very relevant lately. (He'd whispered ia ia Cthulhu fhtagn to the glove while Selvig was taking a
bathroom break and been a little disappointed that nothing happened and very, very, very relieved that nothing did.)

Also it really liked jazz. That wasn't necessarily something wrong, some of it was great, but when they played certain songs or artists it distinctly shifted the world a little so Selvig won instead of lost at playing chess against the computer and Jarvis started running through their simulations like they were silk and not ridiculously overcomplicated equations that normally would overload most university supercomputers.

They tried playing it Grace Jones and it hadn't liked it, but Dies Irae was all right so long as it was the Mozart version. If they played musicals the gems twinkled to the beat but audiobooks made Bruce trip on empty air until they changed it.

Even with all that the glove still wasn't sentient. Just picky, possessed of a bad sense of humour and missing two gems. They matched the one in Loki's sceptre almost exactly, every jewel giving off something slightly different, but it was fairly easy to establish they weren't made of any mineral that existed on Earth. It was all very disturbing.

Bruce wasn't talking to Selvig about popping the gem out of the sceptre and into the glove, and Selvig wasn't talking to him about it either. Neither of them wanted to be the one to tell Fury the sceptre's gem was one of five like it and quite possibly the weakest.

Neither of them wanted to be the one responsible for somehow making the glove get up and dance on their heads or something if they did put in the gem. There was a real risk, capricious as it seemed to be, of it compelling them to put a song on repeat for the rest of their lives. Or possibly just make them lose at chess before they even started playing. Or all of the above. It was silly to resent a glove, but Bruce was doing it anyway.

So right now Bruce was retooling the magic shield originally made for the Tesseract with Tony's terrible help slurring into his ear. Between Bruce and Selvig they could decipher enough of his instructions to assemble something that at least gave the same readings as the previous shield, which was all well and good, but the entire adventure -- at the point Selvig lost two toenails it turned from an experience into an adventure by mutual agreement -- was too fraught for Bruce to keep his calm without muttering off into the desert to meditate and pull on his hair every half an hour.

It also gave him an appreciation of the scope of Tony's genius that was more uneasy than glad. For a long time Stark Industries was the face of the war industry, sleek and lethal and beautifully engineered. For a long time American forces had weapons that ruled countries, ignored sovereignty, defied conventions and enforced whatever they pleased, that killed hundreds of thousands without the distinctive mushroom clouds, could be planted as obviously or as covertly as anyone could wish, and the government paid for the privilege in billions upon billions poured into Tony's coffers and redistributed with wine, women and schmaltz.

For quite a while Bruce had travelled in the ruins left behind by those weapons, doing what he could as a volunteer in places no-one without an invincible and indestructible alter ego could go without dying, had travelled and doctored and closed thousands of dead faces and loathed Tony Stark.

Then he'd met the man and instead of a sociopath he found Tony's profound awareness of how remote he was from any imaginable common denominator with anyone else on the planet -- and that, frankly, was the last thing Bruce expected from the merchant of death. He'd wanted guilt and shame and got all that plus someone determined to dedicate everything they had to reparations even knowing it was impossible.

That and it was hard to take a mass murderer with a twenty-year two-hundred-million body count
seriously when they were poking you against all common sense and offering out-of-season blueberries.

Hard, too, to take him seriously when he was ranting at Selvig about steady hands and failing at miniature painting and how both of those things were why Selvig would never be an engineer, let alone a decent one.

But the fact of the magic shield coming together under his hands, constructing Tony's genius line by line and particle by particle, told him one thing: Tony was about to collapse under the weight of his own mind, maybe had been rocking on the edge of it for years.

Iron Man was Tony's darling, constantly perfected and perfected and perfected, squeezing everything he could out of the materials he had and running up against the hard, tautological limit of perfected perfection. There was a pinnacle approaching, and it'd remain stubbornly in his way until Tony could come up with something else fascinating and new.

And Tony didn't think he could do it. If he could, the magic shield wasn't it. It was brilliant the way a final flare of genius was brilliant, and that was all there was. He could expand it, he could reconstruct it, he could do all sorts of things, but that was all child's play to Tony because it was finished. All it needed now was refining, and there lay the same problem Tony had with Iron Man, with Stark Tower, with everything.

Did Loki see it that day in the tent? He must have.

If the equations were a gift to Selvig, and the formatting a gift to Agent Barton, the glove with its wealth of mysterious materials and effects was a gift for Tony.

So far it all reeked of an assumption of competence so basic to Loki he hadn't ever considered that they wouldn't be capable. It was both flattering and insulting but it was Loki, so of course it was. And probably the compliment was only two-edged because they couldn't see the other edges yet. Presumably they were meant to find out. Somehow. Or just trip over them.

Bruce hesitated on his way back to the tent, stealing a few more seconds away from his own weariness to outline an idea he really didn't like. What if Tony wore the glove? What if, in Loki's schemes, he was meant to?

It wouldn't fit a human hand; one of its fingers could take two or three of theirs. The other guy couldn't wear it, his hands were too big. But it would fit Iron Man, and of course Tony was the logical choice, and of course the suit, to protect him from possible effects and record its data, and of course the Tesseract had ended up on Tony's tower in the first place so of course if it was a possible defense against Thanos coming straight for it Tony would insist on being the one to test it regardless of everything else. But taken all together it was an inevitability labelled with a picture of Tony wearing the glove.

He had to admire that kind of deviousness.

But to what end? What purpose was there in making it be Tony?

What did Loki even want that he thought Tony would give him?

Selvig waved him inside and Bruce blinked into the tent's lighting, grabbing coffee to even out his blood pressure and taking a stool at the table they'd cleared, blueprints rolled up and stacked against a support pole, equipment trailing cables over the dirt.

For something supposed to contain a gauntlet that cheated at poker, it was unimpressive. He
remembered Tony's version being much more ... chic.

"It's goddamn ugly," Selvig said. Bruce tried to remember when he'd slept last, and couldn't. Selvig had been taking the brunt of development in Tony's absence, and he looked ragged. "Everything working?"

"As it should," Bruce said, and read off values to Tony, who didn't believe him until Jarvis' camera read it to him too.

Tony sighed in their earpieces. "It should work if you haven't fucked anything up." His voice bubbled a little, and Bruce grimaced at the reminder that Tony was more alcohol than blood at the moment. "Start it. And for fuck's sake stand back. It's a magic shield, not a pig pen."

"Pigs bite," Bruce told him, standing well back.

"Do I sound like I give a fuck? Hurry up and start it."

Nothing happened. No explosions. But the counters started whining a little, infrared blipping over the three-foot-by-three-foot disruption, and the air above the table looked like it was going in too many directions.

"Looks good," Tony said. "Come on, move the thing. It's buttugly."

Bruce and Selvig gingerly picked up the glove via extremely long tongs, carefully designed to conduct as little as possible of anything, and deposited it into the shielding box. It was their first actual containment test without relying on their faulty is-Loki-lying-or-not radars.

"Play poker or something. Jarvis, load up chess."

Bruce won by a respectable amount, and it was so blessedly normal that he wanted to hug Selvig.

Changing the music didn't make Bruce trip over anything, either, readings holding steady and jewels dimming, and if he didn't know better he'd say the glove was pouting.

"So far it works."

A relief, but that was about all Bruce could muster.

"Guys, where's the enthusiasm? Don't you like it? Aren't I awesome? I'm brilliant. I'm a geeeenius."

Selvig gave a slow, slow sigh. "Very useful. Goodnight, Tony."

There was an indignant squawk. "You can't go to bed now!"

"I haven't slept," Selvig said, in tones of great finality. "Goodnight."

He cleared his throat once Jarvis forced Tony off the line. "I think I've had more sleep than you, so uh ... go ahead."

"Give me six hours if you can. If not, I can work with four. Any less and I'll sit here gibbering."

"Got it." Bruce shook his hand awkwardly. He really, really deserved better than being Tony's labmonkey. "You did great, Doctor Selvig."

"Well, thank you, but these old bones can't take much more."
Which left Bruce alone with a glove he was tempted to call Cthulhu out loud and a stack of data to get through.

"You also did very well, sir."

"Thanks, Jarvis. Do you have to call me sir?"

"It is polite, Master Bruce."

Bruce sighed. "That's ... even worse. How's Tony?"

A brief pause, and Jarvis' voice was flavoured with concern. "Unwell, sir. They will arrive in an hour and forty-eight minutes. May I suggest a nap in the meantime, sir?"

That was actually a really good idea. "You'll wake me up if anything happens? I mean, uh, anything."

"Of course, sir."

Bruce lay on the floor, pillowing someone's discarded coat under his head, and dreamed of the universe's beginning. Jewels twinkled from the corner of the lab and their kin, abandoned in a gold scepter under heavy guard, brightened in its setting and whispered of freedom. Master comes.
They both snored on the jet back to Arizona. Stark declared it a no-light zone as soon as he boarded, draining a shotglass, reclining his seat and draping a blanket over his face.

Cap had followed, smiling sheepishly, and Natasha turned on the light beside her seat at the other end of the jet and wrote as she listened to them wheeze in counterpoint.

She wrote in one of the more difficult forms of Cyrillic cursive for the express purpose of bothering Loki, not oblivious to his attempts at reading her journal upside down but paying him very little attention outside of standard sweeps.

For the moment she wrote about Stark while it was fresh in her mind. Keeping him intoxicated enough to let her do her job was easy, but the job itself was much harder. She managed to foreground quite a few of the memories he had of Thanos, linking them together to hang strongly and shading others Stark couldn't be allowed to fixate on, pinching their links to Loki and his personal history and letting them wither. Untangling the memory dump, one of the messiest she'd ever seen and too knotted upon itself to weave easily into background-foreground-relevant-irrelevant, was a sore, thankless task. Not quite as bad as flushing Loki out of Clint's head, but close. Similar characteristics.

But some progress was progress enough for the moment. All things considered it was the best shot they had at keeping him stable until SHIELD estimated a time to defend, counterattack or both, and if she kept getting him drunk -- belligerent drunks were so easy -- and tipping him where she wanted him, it would flow more smoothly.

Last time Loki's target, the weak link he saw, was Banner. This time it was Stark. The memories, the mysterious glove, the push-pull. Loki was doing his damnedest to break Stark down and build him up for something, that much was obvious to her. His reasoning wasn't as clear.

Jealousy was a given, but not the whole reason. Loki didn't have an army coming, so far as they knew; he had himself, and that gave him less depth and more latitude. If he was working with Thanos and the glove was important, his best chance at subverting SHIELD's defensive efforts was through Stark. If he was working for his own interests his best chance at turning their decisions to align with his was through Selvig, someone both Stark and Fury highly respected.

It didn't escape her that the glove quite neatly solved Loki's impending problem of having to show his hand either way. Gloved it, one could say, and she was sure that implication was deliberate.

She'd been so close to maneuvering him into another mistake, too.

"Does it bother you?" low in the dim.

She lifted an eyebrow, looking up to let Loki know she'd heard. His reaction to Banner apparently ignoring him had been ... touchy, and she'd noted it on a thread parallel with her observations of Thor. Neither of them took well to being left out; if they saw an opportunity to insert themselves back into a conversation, they took it.

"That I have children when you do not."

"No." She continued to write, satisfied with her answer and unfolding three possible directions for the conversation. Two she was prepared for; one she would have to handle very carefully to avoid sabotaging Cap's efforts.

Chapter 36
Loki leaned forward, gleaming. "It does not trouble you they are monstrous?"

Of course it was that direction, and she tugged at threads, watched them unspool, and decided. Either she got off the jet with another understanding between her and Loki, or they got off the jet with the first one broken, Loki on fire, and her rules thoroughly enforced. Either way she would come out ahead. "I don't know much about Jotun," she said.

"Ah." He sat back. "You would not. They are monsters, of course. Very brutish, very ugly. Quite fearsome. Calling them giants is not a misnomer."

She lifted the other eyebrow. "You're a little short for a giant."

"Not so as you," he noted.

"I'm human, mostly," she said, and turned to a fresh page, writing on the back of the one she'd just filled. "Height matters less."

"As does monstrousness?"

"No, that matters." Natasha twitched a shoulder and continued, deliberately linking one thread to another. "I'm familiar with evil. Your son is, as far as I can tell, very lonely. That just doesn't translate into evil without some kind of pressure."

This page was about Cap. Cap, who wasn't sleeping, Cap who had most of his memories of the war brought forward whenever he dealt with Loki and was both more and less shaken after each talk. She'd watched Loki's interaction with the two of them and other than the memory dump it didn't come across as much more than a play for sympathy, but allowed to continue unchecked it would be dangerous.

Cap was primed to accept the idea of a misguided recruit placed in conditions they weren't prepared for and making terrible decisions as a result, and from what she could tell Loki was doing his best to play it that way.

It was all very sensible, given the precariousness of what they knew about his position, but his interactions with her were different and it irked her a little that he wasn't even trying to get her on his good side. He felt like he was testing whether she was a one-trick pony, and that setup didn't let her assess his skill all that well. But unfortunately for him and fortunately for her, she had many tricks.

Loki had his eyes narrowed at her; he'd picked up the semantics. Good. "Your people speak of necessary evils, of greater goods, and yet you are no better than the ones you destroy."

"I tend not to weep over ethics," she said.

"Why not?" He was considering her, a knee held to his chest. Not a position she'd ever seen Thor in, or Loki during his official captivity. Calculated vulnerability was something she could work with.

Softly softly, and she smiled. "They matter less when your personhood's negotiable."

"Instead you carry debts you cannot hope to repay."

"Pretty much."

He smirked. "Your methods fail you so often, don't they? Do you not remember Drakoff's daughter?"
Natasha smiled back and let her hand pause in the middle of a word. "Actually, I thought you could tell me."

"What?"

"I don't remember." She shrugged and proceeded to tell an absolute truth. "Agent Barton knows more about me than I do at this point. So if you would be willing to share ...?"

She watched him search her words for lies, his mouth twisting thinner and thinner. "Has that happened very often?"

"Some," she said, and tipped her head in genuine curiosity. "Am I Drakoff's daughter?"

He flinched. "No. Not as Barton told me."

Natasha nodded. "Thanks," and went back to writing.

Loki was studying her, visibly disconcerted. She had a suspicion from the half-angle of his eyebrows that it was genuine; Loki had a tendency to level out his forehead when he either faked puzzlement or pretended to be faking puzzlement. "It does not matter to you?"

"Should it?"

He frowned, pulling up both knees. "Yes," as though it was terribly obvious and she was very ignorant.

Natasha formed a few suspicions together into a question she would've preferred not to ask. "Does Asgard care for its orphans?"

"If there are kin. If not they are wards of the tutors, and take their names. They are given to serve warriors in battle."

"Sounds a bit like my regime," she murmured. "Should the orphans care which tutor sends them off to die?"

Loki chuckled. "Yes. A good tutor will have them die quickly, silently, as not to interfere. A bad tutor will train them to resist their death and become unneeded slop."

"If they don't die?"

"To be of use is their purpose. Why should they not serve in death also?"

Natasha shrugged. "I didn't."

"Ah." He tapped his fingers on his knees. "Should one not merely survive, but thrive -- then no, the tutor does not matter. I did not thrive," he added.

She studied him right back until he made contemptuous faces. "Want to know what I think?"

Loki sighed. "You will, as any other irritating mortal, tell me regardless. Go on."

"Consider Thor."

"You overstep your bounds, mortal."

She went on. "Would you thrive in his position?"
"Of course," blinking. "He is favoured, beloved -- his birthright was never in doubt -- he is assumed to be the rightful king of Asgard -- he is trusted with Mjolnir -- how could I not?"

She hummed disagreement. "And Odin's expectations wouldn't matter?"

Loki chuckled. "Of course they would," pitying. "It is the king's approval which matters most. His decisions are the decisions of the realm."

"I guess I'm wondering if there's a difference between Odin and the king of Asgard." Natasha settled more comfortably in her seat, closing the notebook. "I don't see him giving up the throne to anyone. Ever. And, you know, I talked to Thor before he left. He said some interesting things." She tipped her head, half-smiling. "It's very convenient to have someone try to steal the casket at just that moment."

He was picking at the hem of his trousers now, eyes lowered and more than a little hunched. The smirk was very false to her eye. "Just some fun. Ruining my brother's big day."

Natasha crossed her ankles, threads coming together to a point of near-confirmation. She plucked it. "How long has Odin been using you to cover for his magic?"

"Not long enough," Loki said, and looked stricken before he cleared his face of emotion. "It was my privilege to help him. Our secret. I didn't want to tell him how I got to Jotunheim the first time I saw Angrboda, but he asked." His eyes lifted to meet hers, wide and choked with anger, and he became more agitated as he went on. "He never asks. It was just ... a test. If Thor could be trusted to obey. If he was to be a good king for Asgard. A -- a wise king. Our father preaches warrior's patience. Peace among the realms. I did it for all of us. Even you wretched mortals."

"Surely you realised he never intended to give up the throne."

Loki made a sad, bitter sound. "Of course. But it is Thor. If not Thor, then no-one." He sighed and sat back, hands relaxing. "Once Mother gave me the king's spear, it was a matter of time. I tried, and my reward was failure. Hope is a coward's refuge. Tell Thor if you like. He will never believe Odin possesses anything less than perfect wisdom."

Natasha shook her head. "He's questioning that. I don't know if it's enough."

"It will not change anything. He loves Odin, and believes he does no wrong. Your blandishments are as nothing in the face of his loyalty."

Thor's despair, his shaking, sobbing grief, gave her cause to wonder. His response to their questioning indicated he would attempt some kind of dialogue with his parents. It would fail more likely than not, but not for the reasons Loki assumed; Natasha rather thought he would be speaking to his mother.

She didn't know enough about Frigga to say whether she was supportive of Odin's schemes, masterminding, contributing, browbeaten, indifferent, jealous, or a combination -- but Loki clearly took her handing him the throne to be a sign of goodwill. How inaccurate his perception was depended, again, on things she wasn't in a position to accurately calculate.

"He says he loves you," Natasha said, mild as she could, and let it stand as a question.

"Did you not say love is for children, Agent Romanova? I may be a child by Asgard's reckoning, but Thor is not." Loki rubbed the backs of his hands; a self-soothing gesture, one she'd seen most often in neglected children. "He will be king, and I am exiled, and that is the end of it."
"He won't be king as long as Odin has power, though." Really, this was all very much like dealing with the regimes she'd seen, formed of a cult of personality and feverishly dedicated to maintaining their leader's reputation.

He grinned, sharp and bright. "Yes. He must die. I would very much like to see my brother's expression when he discovers the fact."

Natasha poured herself a glass of soda. "You never intended to keep the throne, did you?"

"I did not want it. My position was legitimate, my desire less so. I am not .... fond ... of minutiae. Much, much less the inevitable pain of my father establishing his position." He snarled. "Still I would not have my claim questioned. I did as I thought best."

She settled in with her drink and said nothing, carefully blanking and letting him project what he wanted to think her reaction was, and she wasn't disappointed.

Five minutes later, in an angry torrent: "I did. That race of monsters were not fit to live any longer; they were dying, wretched and starving. Laufey's throne an empty relic, Laufey-king reigning over the death of a realm once thriving, and these were my -- my origins, so concealed from me. My father spoke of peace, bestowed the yoke, stole me from their most hallowed hall, and expected gratitude that he displayed the heart of their people in a forgotten treasury and did not destroy it upon its pedestal. He desired peace, brought nothing but bitter surrender, and cared not for the difference. I, at least, hastened their destruction, and did not pretend I was merciful. Think as you please; I care not."

He subsided into stormy silence, mouth twitching as though he was biting back a good deal more.

Natasha absorbed it carefully. It was unclear whether he thought the casket or himself was the heart of Jotunheim. For Loki, probably himself. "I'm not questioning your claim, just that genocide was the best way to go about proving it. Did you believed it was what Odin wanted?"

"How else could it have been?" he cried, exasperated. Most of it sounded like it was directed at himself, not her. "He desired their death. Tis obvious. Though they did not do so at his hands," and he smiled. "That was my doing. Though it came to naught," and he frowned again. "You are assigned to my death, are you not?"

She saw no reason to lie about the answer to an exercise in very simple deductive reasoning. "Yes."

"Good," and he looked at her with eager, hopeful eyes. "I would rather it were you. You are too -- you will not torture me, I think, it is not your wretched code. You will tell me, will you not, when you do? I will allow it, any method you wish, if you but tell me."

"Yes," Natasha promised, answering truth with truth.

Loki smiled happily, settling in his seat and drawing a blanket over his shoulders. "Then all is well. I will hold you to your word."

She smiled back. "It's a bad idea to hold me to anything. Someone said I'm a liar in the service of liars. Ohh," lifting a finger from her glass and pointing, consciously mirroring Stark's habit. "I think that was you."

"So it was." He tapped his fingers against his cheek, tracing a dimple. "Does your code comfort you?"

"Not often." Natasha shrugged. "It does what I need when I need it."
"Oh, most useful," half-irony.

She chuckled. "So, what else did Barton tell you about me?"

Loki shook his head with a grin. "In truth? Very little. There was not at all time, and I confess I was not interested beyond your most grievous regrets. Your mortal lives are so tedious, for all they are short."

"Hell of a bluff." Natasha poured herself another glass and toasted him. "I almost believed you. I'm sure the others did. So -- who won that round?"

"I believe myself familiar with coming to a draw."

She thought a moment. "Can your pride live with that?"

"I must, mustn't I? The opportunity to continue at a later date and press whatever advantages I can acquire requires a concession or several. Even I find my current circumstances ... dire. Be honoured I admit to such in your presence." He pointed at her soda. "What is that? It makes noise."

"This, my honoured prisoner, is a Coke." She handed it to him. "A drink a lot of us like. I can't actually explain it."

Loki made a horrible face at the first sip and handed it back in a pincer grip as though touching the glass more than he had to would contaminate him. "Mortals!"
Tony fell to his knees. "Solid ground, oh my god, I love you, oh my god," and he would've kissed it if Bruce hadn't dragged him up into a hug.

"We missed you," Bruce said into his ear, and squeezed him a bit too tightly.

He patted his back. "Let's not all get feelings up in here, okay? There, there. Let go already, Jesus. It's nice to be needed though." Tony muttered, and seriously, that was enough for one day.

He'd had enough feelings all up in his head recently to last him years and years.

Bruce got off him, though, and Tony stared. "You look like a goddamn zombie."

"I'm Frankenstein."

"Don't stop being you," Tony said. "All mopey and miserable and awful. Wait, can you be you and crack a smile? Is that historically possible? Come on, science bro, we've got science to do, don't we? Where's Selvig?"

"Sleeping."

"Still? God. Let's get Loki dropped off and I'll come see what's got you so zombied. Seriously, you look awful. Agent Roooooomanooooooova! What's keeping you?"

Steve looked terrible too, squinty and crusty around the eyes, but Bruce was winning the terrible stakes right now, so Tony felt better about his own mangy hair. Not literally mangy. But mangy-looking. Ish. He reflexively patted it and comforted himself that at least Loki's looked worse.

God, it was greasy. Somebody had to get that kid decent shampoo. First things first, though.

Wait, no, seriously, first things first.

Who was he kidding, he was brilliant.

"Come along!" waving to Loki and ignoring the phalanx of unhappy-looking SHIELD guards. "Don't mind us, we're just going to the lab ..."

"Is that wise, Stark?" Director Fury, over the comm Bruce was holding out to him, and Tony rolled his eyes and spoke into it.

"So says the life model decoy of Tony Stark. Don't be a fuddy-duddy." He took it when Bruce shoved it at him, though, making puppy eyes. Probably didn't realise, but it looked like Fury'd been on his ass for hours and Tony was here to save him.

Well, shit, son, that was just what he was gonna do. "What is it you plan?" Loki said from his shoulder.

Tony looked up at him over his sunglasses, cracking a grin at the sight of his face wrapped up in one of Romanova's silk scarves like a silver screen starlet. "You're too tall, y'know? Come along, minions. Give me a buggy. That's a buggy, give it, give it -- thank you, lovely SHIELD officer ma'am, bugger off. Brucie, get in back. You too, Stevie. Toodles!"

Romanova took the front seat on the other side of Loki, and when he glanced in the rearview
was giving Bruce worried glances. Tony knew the feeling. It was good to drive again. The sub was cool, the jet was cool, but it wasn't really driving, not like this, with the wheels spitting sand behind them and people he actually liked bugging him. Most of them he liked. It was good. Novel. But good.

"One of you," he said over the wind, "is putting Brucie to bed, and the other one of you is going to come keep me company in case Loki goes crazy with lust at my immeasurable genius and tries to mojo my face off. Play rock paper scissors or something!"

"I will have nothing to do with your face, filthy mortal," Loki snapped from beside him, terribly indignant and sounding sleep-deprived to hell.

He cackled. "I'd be way more offended by that if you didn't sound exactly like Spider Jerusalem right now."

"To me, filthy assistants!" Romanova called out, way too jaunty in her red hair and huge sunglasses. She looked like she was daytripping in Belgium or something. He was surrounded by people who were too gorgeous to be real.

Except for how she knew things she totally shouldn't have known, and Tony almost drove off the road with shock. "Oh, my God, you read that. You read that. I almost like you now, this is the worst."

"What are you even talking about?" Steve bleated.

"It's a comic book," Romanova told him, and proceeded to turn in her seat, hanging over the back, and try to explain the unexplainable at a necessarily loud volume while Tony took great pleasure in hitting every pothole he could and making Loki look queasier and queasier.

Bruce was asleep, because he was Bruce.

"You should do that from now on," Tony told Loki, leaning his head out of the way to avoid getting his dirty hair in his mouth. Godly helmet hair, gross. "Say that, I mean. 'To me, filthy mortals!' That'd be awesome."

He turned his head from Romanova's futile attempts to explain, wearing a look of great puzzlement that almost exactly matched Steve's right now. "What is a 'breatharian'?"

Tony screeched laughter, and he felt it too, what Romanova felt -- the joy of being out of the sub, of being back on land and in the world of things way, way more familiar. And the sun. Sunlight was amazing. Not having to dwell on Odin's stellar parenting or the lurking gravitationally horrible darkness in the back of his head helped shitloads too. "Sort of like an imaginary religion without the religion!"

"Aside from us aren't they all?"

He almost drove off the road again trying to imagine if Greek gods actually existed and the total fucking havoc Tony'd have to deal with. Then he saw Steve's stubborn face and intervened. This was so not the place for a theological argument. "Uh ... no comment on that one, oh God, what if the other ones are real, no comment!"

"But --"

"Maybe it won't happen if you stop talking about it!"
Loki shook his head. "That never works."

"I can hope. Leave me some hope, okay, be kind, aren't gods supposed to be nice once in a while?"

"Not me. Not often."

"Well, fuck you, then." Tony parked next to the SHIELD facility. "Go on, one of you get Bruce tucked in."

Romanova and Steve exchanged glances, having some sort of conversation that was probably really dutiful and boring, and in the end Romanova got out of the buggy and dragged Bruce with her, waking him up enough to stumble along. "Stark! Keep in touch."

"Yeah, yeah, comms, I know. So, Capsicle! How confused are you right now?"

"Very!" Steve said, clutching the back of Tony's seat and leaning forward to stick his head between him and Loki's shoulders. "What are you even doing, Tony?"

"Ah-ah, it's a surprise. I can't talk about it, I literally can't, I have, like ... a something that means I can't talk about it, not like that, God, don't look like that --"

"What do you think literally means, Tony?"

"Not metaphorical. Unless I want it to be. Then it's a metaphorical literal metaphor. You should know that by now, I'm hurt, I thought we were besties."

Tony felt the puff of a Tonysigh against his arm. "I don't think we know each other well enough yet."

"Don't worry," he assured him, giving his most rakish grin. "I'll definitely fix that."

"Oh, I believe you," Steve said. He pretended not to hear. La la la.

Tony bundled them out of the buggy once they reached the lab, hooking his fingers in Loki's shirt collar and pulling him along. SHIELD had radioed guards in and around the tent already. Well, that was sensible. "Sit, sit. Won't take long. No peeking."

Loki glared. "I should cut off your hands for impertinence."

"Impertinence's what I do, baby," Tony said, waggling his eyebrows, and when it looked like Loki was only going to think murderous thoughts instead of actually being murderous, he went over to the other side of the lab and called up Jarvis. "Seriously, no peeking!"

All of the materials were there, the schematics were all field-tested -- everything should be fine. Now all he had to do was make it.

He could still hear them, the clink of Loki's heels on the rung of the stool, the creak of Steve's chair.

"Is he always uncouth?" Loki asked, like he was actually curious, and Tony let his hands and mouth work without him and listened. Let them think he was completely preoccupied.

"I don't know," Steve said. "Like I said, I don't know him very well. He doesn't, ah, make it easy."

Loki snorted. "Few with secrets do."

Tony would protest the secrets thing, except, oh yeah, right, and he started on the solder. Doing the
Tesseract's jar version made it a lot easier to figure out the calculations for tripling the strength of the suppression field, and he kind of wanted to see Loki's face when he realised.

Bruce and Selvig did great work already, both on the simulation and source side, and all Tony had to do now was mount, integrate and slap it on.

Mounting was almost done. Integration was the hardest part. This stuff did weird things scaling, and demos only went so far without use testing. Everything checked out okay, though. Combining the magic shield into the suppression of the chains was a lot easier than he'd expected once he'd figured out the crossover. Magic was pretty similar, at least Asgard magic from person to ...whoever mojoed the chains.

Probably Loki's dad. Did a particular person's magic have unique attributes? Or was it more like genetics -- uncle's face, grandfather's eyes, family nose, etcetera? Probably. Thor talked about Loki's magic like it was weird.

He'd be more bothered about human experimentation -- was it human experimentation if it was a god involved? did the whole don't-experiment-on-minors thing still apply if the minor in question was older than feudalism? -- if he weren't so tired of Loki having to wear buttons on his shoulders all the time so he could get his shirts on, the style was just ridiculous.

Cutting up the first one to get it on him had been a cut-and-paste job and the last couple sets were a lot better, someone'd put thought into making it a bit less visible that he was having to get his clothes buttoned on him by the guards, but still, the amount of gunk that had to be under the cuffs made Tony cringe a little bit and think nasty words like sepsis and trenchfoot.

Also there was the thing with how Loki's dad probably was the chain guy, and he bet Loki was used to this shit. Which made it pretty terrible actually, but Tony wasn't in the business of not being terrible except on alternate new moon Wednesdays.

Anyway. If Loki fled into the desert he'd trip and die or something and then everybody would be really pissed off. Tony kinda wanted to avoid that.

So.

That decided he tuned back in and discovered they'd moved and were trying to figure out the blender.

Tony motioned for Jarvis to start recording, stifling giggles, and bent back to work. It'd be good to have a laugh later. On his own time. When he wasn't in the same room as a temperamental godling.

When Tony looked up again nothing seemed to have exploded and he'd finished half a smoothie he hadn't known was in his hand, real icecream and strawberries, and Loki was leaning at his elbow, studying his work with an amused little twitch of his mouth.

"AH JESUS." Tony clutched the reactor, gasping. "Stop fucking doing that!"

"You were very focused," Loki said smoothly, and it was the furthest thing from an apology. Tony glared. "Is my new prison to be a punishment, or a reward?"

"Either, neither. It's better if you're not dragging the chain around all the time."

"You cannot contain me."

Tony shook his head. "Oh, if I was trying, you'd know. This is just replacing that," gesturing with
the soldering iron, "with something better."

Loki leaned close, voice soft, the back of Tony's throat going greasy the way it did when Loki loaded up his magic thing. It seemed to work like a battery, had to charge a bit before he did anything. "Must I repeat myself?"

"No, you know what, yeah," leaning back and giving him his best unimpressed face, "I might be threatening you a little bit. You don't know how strong these are. You wanna underestimate me, go ahead. You wanna believe I underestimate you, go ahead. What're you gonna do?"

"You will regret your insolence," Loki said, eyes half-closed like he was listening to something else. "How you will regret. Perhaps you should regret this very moment of your defiance."

"I'm sorry, last I checked, defiance? Needs authority. You're not the boss of me. No boss. I'm the bossman. Don't your hands hurt? Aren't you curious how bad it is under those?" Tony widened his eyes and leaned in to whisper mock-frantically. "Maybe your hands will fall off."

"They would not," Loki snapped, but he fingered the edges of the cuffs anyway in Tony's peripheral vision. Ha. "Do you forget who I am?"

Tony pretended to think about it. "Uh, you're Loki?"

He got in Tony's face, doing the looming thing that made him look twice as tall as he normally did. There were even spooky shadows. It made Loki look really, really ... like something was wrong. "I am a god. I will not be spoken to this way."

"Okay, soooo ... don't talk to me while I'm working. I get, like, maximum rude. Go talk to Steve if you don't want rude. He can't be rude if his life depends on it. Maybe if someone else's life depended on it, and even then he'd be like 'go fuck yourself, oh pardon my francais'."

"I would not!" deeply scandalised. "Tony!"

"I'm not sorry!" he announced, and looked at Loki over his sunglasses. "See what I mean? That. But yeah, you keep distracting me while I'm getting things done, I'm ... you know I have no brain-to-mouth filter, right? I mean, this is a thing, this is my thing. I'm working, okay? I refuse to compromise myself so that you can feel better. Seriously. I refuse."

That got him a very serious examination that made Tony make faces and turn back to the solder, because a) it was uncomfortable and b) he wasn't a bug, thanks. No chitin or anything. Hey, hmm, chitin, what if --?

"I would not ask you to."

"What? I was having a thought." Tony grumbled. "Ask me what?"

"To compromise." Loki was staring. Intensely. Creepily. He looked sick, in the bad Tesseract way. "I would not."

"Uh, okay. That's -- that's nice, that's good, I appreciate it, so, uh, if I can be uncompromising here, that'd be great, thanks."

That got a smirk. "Indeed." He was still looming, the back of Tony's throat getting slipperier whenever he tried to swallow, and there wasn't anything -- Loki about him, or the Loki they'd managed to pry out of his shell with smoothies and conversations about horrible things. This wasn't the high-handed little shit, this was the guy they'd thought was a megalomaniac adult.
Tony side-eyed him. Next to him at a table full of controller bits was the last place Loki really should be right now. "You're actually getting kind of creepy now, so why don't you go bother Steve while I finish these? You know, because I'm actually working. Like a working person. I'm working on things that'll make your life easier, even, because I'm just that big-hearted. Go on."

"You have no heart at all, but a machine," Loki said, and it was almost polite. Steve moved to block Loki from reaching the glove. Tony agreed that was the only thing that could be setting him off like this; Loki had started wavering as soon as he walked into the tent. Little-shit Loki didn't lock his heels against the bar when he sat down, he was too paranoid. Arrogant douchebag Loki did, because he was so overconfident it didn't occur to him that not being able to run away right off might actually be a drawback.

Tony flipped him off. "No, that's the proof that I have a heart, see?" Tony looked him up and down. "Where's your proof?"

"You live."

Tony squinted and saw Loki was kind of swaying now, something weird going on with his face, like he wanted to scream but couldn't. He decided to treat him like he was the same little shit and hopefully that got them ... something ... to work with that wasn't wondering if they were all going to die now.

"Okay, what's -- level with me. Come on. What's going on here? Something's wrong, what is it? Sleepy? Hungry? Cranky? I can't fix cranky, but I can fix hungry, and if you're sleepy, just take a nap. There's a sleeping bag right there. Steve can read you a story or something."

"It calls to me," he said, hands flexing, and Tony watched them with a sense that he probably should be way more alarmed right now. "It whispers of power." Loki closed his eyes, humming. "Do you not hear it?"

"Uh, no, is it the glove thing? It is, right? Just checking."

"Mhm. Yes. It is so near." He sounded like it hurt, but he wasn't moving closer to it either, and there it was -- a shuffling step away from it, and a snarl, then another half-step.

Tony would be pretty unhappy about a glove trying to take him over, too.

"You know what, uh, Steve, Steve --" Oh, good old Steve, he was already right there, still firmly between and showing Loki his hand, asking permission, and taking his elbow when he got a twitchy nod. "Why don't you go escort Loki to his goldfish bowl and I'll be riiight along, okay?" Tony shooed him. "Now! Now would be good."

Loki smiled, but it looked wrong. His eyes were too bright, too steady, and that was the thing -- Loki without the Tesseract's influence was a sneaky little shit, but he was conflicted all the fucking time about everything. Steadiness just wasn't in the kid, and it showed from the mood swings to all of the mysterious hints at contradictory plans that they all fell over each other trying to figure out before he laughed at them and hinted at new ones to break their brains with.

"You will need to move the other gem for my mind to settle. They sing to one another, you see, and I am their conduit. They remember me. They know my mind." He shivered and grinned, wide and wrong. "You will all die without quarrel."

"Wait, so the mojo stick and the sparklies really are related? Also, you're officially fucking creepy," Tony told him, and between him and Steve they managed to keep Loki upright and convince the
SHIELD base that taking the spear as far away from Loki as possible under very heavy guard was a great idea.

Steve escorted Loki out, and how he managed to keep his composure in the face of a Loki slowly descending into the kind of evil batshit he'd been ... what, last week, or the week before, something like that, Tony had no idea how he could even do it.

Tony kind of wanted to lose his own shit, actually.

Getting stared at like Loki wanted nothing better than to dissect him was uncomfortably familiar.

But lately it'd been teasing.

Loki hadn't been teasing just now.

Tony stared at the glove. It gleamed inside the magic shield, dull like costume jewelry, and he flipped it off. "Fuck you, you piece of shit. Lay off the mindfuck, would you?"

It didn't help, really, but scolding it made him feel better and that was what counted.

"He says it's a holdover from the sceptre," Steve said through the comm a little later, one bracelet almost finished and the other a good two-thirds done.

"So is he like a battery for their evil or something? With the magic and stuff? Just ask him."

Steve responded a little later, clearing his throat. "Exactly like that, he says. But he says they're not evil."

"So what'd they want?"

This pause was shorter. "To be used. It grants whatever the wearer desires."

Tony groaned, louder than he intended. "That's it? It's a superpowered version of Dummy? This is his grand finale? Come on. Where's the fucking encore?"

Loki was laughing, he could hear it even over the comms, the reverb warped like Steve was outside the cell for now. At least Capsicle had some common sense sometimes.

Steve made worried noises. "He's not talking."

"I'm going to have to touch it, aren't I?" Tony said rhetorically. "I'm going to have to touch the fucking thing."

"Not without -- "

"Steve." Tony let himself drop into seriousness. "Aren't we kinda past the point of doing stuff on our own anyway? I'll figure out a way to touch it without actually, you know, touching it after I finish these things. We'll see what it does. Can you just keep him out of my hair?"

"I'll try," Steve said. "He's a bit restless."

"So make him sleep, he looks awful. Tell him he looks awful and I said to get some beauty sleep so he has a chance of looking better than my arse in the morning. That should do it."

"I'm not going to do that, Tony."
He grinned. Steve was so easy. "So -- what do you think? Real? Faked? Dramatised?"

"I think there's an awful lot he's not telling us. Be careful. Please."

"Yeah, I will," and muted. Tony stared at the guards. "You totally know what I'm going to do, don't you?"

They all pointed their weapons at him and one of them rolled their eyes.

"Okay. Cool. Fair enough." He picked it up.

The glove was even uglier hanging from his hand, empty sockets gleaming. Genuine gold. Useless. Gold was a shitty material for anything you actually had to use. Too soft, too easy to scuff, needed too much polishing. The gems were real, though. You didn't get that kind of unimpressive surface gleam if you weren't real. It was the fake shit that sparkled. This stuff, though, glowed on the inside.

"It's like you have eyes."

Really, he should be working on the bracelets, but they were so close to done anyway. And besides he was curious, so sue him for property damage or lying to Captain America or whatever.

"You know what I wanna know? Where you came from. Where'd Loki hide you, down his pants? Come on. It's not like he's smuggling budgies or anything. You're a macguffin, the point of you is either to drive me to distraction and really bad cashflow decisions, or to help me save the world, maybe a universe, throw in a couple moons. If you were my macguffin, you'd do that."

Tony turned it over, tapping the fingers. "You're not. You're Loki's, I've just got you on temporary loan, probably to completely fuck with me. But let's say you are fucking with me. Whether or not that's actually true. Like you even could fuck with me. So ... what's so important you've got to hypnotise him? Why's he important to you if you're the kind of doohickey that saves the universe? Conduits are a dime a dozen at the hardware store, just build them yourself."

... no barren moon ...

He dropped the glove very carefully back into its magic-shielding enclosure and revelled in the sensation of breathing.

"Stay out of my head, you creepy fuck."

Of course moons were barren. They were moons, duh. For a mystic glove it was pretty damn stupid.

"I'm okay," he told the guards. "Actually," frowning at it, "Can you check if Fury's up?"

That voice wasn't Loki's. It actually even sounded a tiny bit familiar. Not from his own life, but from the morass Loki dumped in his head.

This had the potential to be very, very bad. But Loki said the glove was a gift. Had pretty much told Steve it was meant to help. But that voice. "What the fuck is that little shit playing at?"
"Showtime," Clint said, tapping the door of Loki's cell, and Loki stirred under the covers as the door opened. S H I E L D'd cleaned up the cell while they were away, given him fresh sheets and two more blankets, and Loki was using every last one of them. At least he didn't look spear-crazy, so moving it away had helped. "Up you go."

"Yes, let's see how this works. Of course it'll work, I just want to know if there'll be fireworks or something or if you'll just start going on about disembowelling me. That's totally not allowed, by the way, you can't actually do that." Stark sounded manic, but also very impressed with himself as usual, so Clint figured it balanced out.

Helped that Selvig was supervising and looking much, much better for being allowed to get a full night's sleep. He'd even cracked a joke when Clint handed him coffee.

Loki was on his feet now, smoothing his rumpled shirt and pushing back his hair and scowling at the world. The sleep-squint kind of ruined the effect, though, and he held out his wrists without being asked when Stark came closer, waving the bracelets. There were four of them in sets of two that looked like they'd been braided together, something about stabilising or feedback loops or whatever Clint hadn't actually been listening to.

They were pretty, but mostly that was just Stark being Stark and refusing to produce anything that didn't look like it could mastermind a space mission all by itself if it wanted to. Clint wasn't complaining, really -- his bows and arrows were damn snazzy, he felt like he was cool, not a throwback to the English longbow -- but the overall effect on the bracelets was pretty girly.

"This might hurt," Stark was saying. "I mean, I don't know what effect this is going to have on you, and it's not like you could scream before anyway, not with the whole ... tongue-stopper thing. Sooo. You game anyway? Up for trying?"

Loki just raised his wrists a little, squinting like Stark was hurting him just by talking. "You may as well."

"You're way too compliant right now," Stark was saying, and geez, don't look a gift horse in the mouth, and that phrase was just ruined forever now, wasn't it. "I mean, seriously, if all it took was putting you in a room with the glove thing."

"It is not the room, nor the glove," Loki said, weirdly listless and kind of peaky now that Clint thought about it. "It is what comes."

"Uh, okay, so ... what's coming?"

"Something I failed," and Loki smiled. "You will be glad, I suspect."

"You're growing on me," Stark said, finished with pressing transmitters onto Loki's head and arms.
"Okay, any last words?"

"I wish that were so," he told them, still smiling.

Stark was glaring and dragging in a custom-built cutter. "We talked about this. Didn't we talk about this? I distinctly remember talking about this --"

Loki sighed. "I was answering the question. Get on with it."

Stark eased the bracelets around his forearms, just above the cuffs, nodded to Selvig, and Clint drew his bow, loaded with the updated version of god-tranqs.

He snapped them shut, and Loki ... withered, withered to his knees, looking like there was nothing under his skin but bone, breathing gone shallow and hitching like he was dying as blue flashed over - - through? There was a fade effect there -- his throat and wrists. Clint had a suspicion the panic was close enough to real that Loki was feeling it either way.

It took Stark eight tries of different-coloured lasers to finally cut through the cuffs, chains slinking to the floor with an unpleasant rattle that had more dimensions than just clinkclinkclink, and the smell that rose from Loki's wrists almost made Cling gag.

They were so infected pus came away in gobs and dripped like honey, flesh slivered deep to scored bone like he'd cut himself shaving over and over with a five-blade razor.

Which matched pretty neatly to the tiny, angled sawblades on the inside of the cuffs, and it was so diabolically brilliant Clint couldn't quite hold in a chuckle. How do you restrain a magic user?, really? Really really stop them using any? Make sure trying makes them cut off their own hands.

It was of a cleverness class with the gag, really, and Clint might not have hated anyone enough for the gag, but he was seriously considering asking Stark to modify the bracelets like that. Just as a precaution. Nat would kill him if he did, but it warmed Clint to think about.

"Yeah, that didn't show up on the xrays either," Stark said, grimacing and waving his hands in front of his nose. "Ugh. God. You okay?"

Loki's colour was filling back in, but he was swaying and glaring at Stark, panting hard, and the flare of magic at his fingertips was weaker than dying cordites.

Stark coughed a giggle. "That should be, oh, ninety-eight percent you can't access. See? I didn't underestimate you! You mad?"

He just sat back on his heels and shuddered, swallowing convulsively. His wrists were still seeping, and Banner cleared his throat and edged past Clint with a SHIELD medical box, full of first-, second-, and third-aid.

"We can change how much we cut off," Banner said, gingerly wiping the wounds. It was a good chunk of flesh cut out, actually, arteries visibly throbbing and tendons flapping fleshy edges. "So if you'd like to negotiate for more access, or prove that we can trust you a little with some things, we can do that."

Loki was still wheezing. "You provide no incentive."

"Oh, okay, how's about dropping it to ninety-five percent? Give you five? Yeah?" Stark signalled Selvig, who did his thing, and Loki's eyes snapped open, fingers twitching weakly, and he breathed like it was the first lungful of air he'd had in a week. "How's that feel?"
Some of the personality was definitely coming back. "Better. I need it," face twisting, fingers twisting with him. "I need," and he broke off with a choked noise when Banner reached in and scooped with his fingers, pulling out strings and bits and a fresh wave of stink. "I must heal this. More. Please," through clenched teeth like begging was agony. Clint hoped it was.

"When it's clean," Banner said, very doctorly.

"Yes." Loki was staring at his hands, twitching his fingers every so often like he was checking they were still attached. "Do so."

"Ninety-two," Selvig said, and Loki stopped shaking.

"Thanks, that makes it easier," Banner said, and Clint held his draw while Stark bounced out of the cell and consulted with Selvig, whispering about things like Odin, what the fuck? and isn't that a bit much and if that's accurate that means trailing into strings of something that sounded the way terms and conditions usually read, full of clauses and exceptions.

Clint really hated the word 'Unless'. Really.

Because yeah, he wished it on Loki, a lot. He wished a lot of things on Loki he couldn't actually do if he wanted to keep his job and the whole an-Avenger thing (a pain in the ass destroying his covert status, but it was the kind of pain in the ass that came with feeling like he was back in the circus again, all glitz and sham and crazy people who knew they were and tried to be decent anyway) and pain was just one of them. But not when it came from his dad, for shit's sake. There were limits.

Clint had limits. Who knew?

Well, Nat, but she never told him these things, just poured more vodka or rum or whatever it was she'd acquired from buttering up her smuggler friends. The black market didn't run on gun exchange, it ran on booze and porn so they didn't all kill each other. Lots and lots of booze.

Most of the porn was shit, anyway. Always someone in the background chowing down on a sandwich and they never bothered to dub over it, the cheapskates. Squelch squelch chomp chomp wasn't his idea of spank material.

Sounded a lot like what was happening with Banner and Loki's insides at the moment, actually, but that was more squelch squelch ting! when Banner's scalpel hit another tooth that'd broken off and burrowed.

"All done, I think," Banner said, kidney dish full of shrapnel by his knees and his gloves bloody. "Feel anything I missed?"

Loki flexed his fingers, bending his wrists, and yeah, there it was, at least one ligament running up the outside had been cut on both sides; his hands weren't splaying out and away how hands normally did, they listed inwards.

Clint wondered how long it would've taken for his hands to actually fall off. Probably a few years. It didn't look like it was designed for long-term use originally; short-term containment, yeah, totally. Long-term, and next to skin? No way. Not if somebody wasn't sadistic, and Clint had serious doubts about Loki's dad failing to fit that playbill.

But he'd stayed anyway, practically shoved Thor off to Asgard without him, even knowing he might lose his hands and still not saying one fucking word to them about it. Hadn't indicated anything about the gag either, it wasn't like the kid couldn't mime. Clint got the idea Loki didn't ask because he didn't see any reason to bother. So it was either let his hands come off or give them the chance to
make it worse, and he'd picked first. Clint could even see how it made sense.

And whether he said anything or not, if Loki went with Thor, he was punished. If Loki stayed, he was punished.

Odin was a real big fan of the double-bind, seemed like, and one day the Avengers were going to have *words*. Clint knew a lot of words.

"No," and Loki touched his own bones, creepily fascinated. "I need more magic, if this is to be quick."

Stark and Selvig had a brief eye-debate that Banner won when he left the cell and reached between them to key something in. "Seventy percent."

"Did you heal this?" Stark asked. "In the boiler room?"

Loki rolled his eyes. "All I could."

"Those things are sharp," almost impressed.

Then it was Clint's turn to be creepily fascinated because watching bone fill in like putty and flesh regrow and tendons snake their way through building muscle was awesome. It was like a time lapse, if somebody stuck a camera in there, or maybe the take-a-photo-a-day videos. There was a moment when Loki flexed his fingers as the skin started creeping over the fat layer and green veins showed through, sparking magic and throbbing to a rhythm that was nothing like the heartbeat underneath them.

Then skin and his arms were whole again, bracelets girly and pretty and really, Clint was really, really glad for Stark being Stark, because they were too small to slide off unless Loki broke his entire hand, but at least somebody could get a chamois or something under them to keep it clean.

"Coming back up to ninety-three percent," Stark said, and Loki twitched, but held still as the colour faded from his cheeks, and rubbed his wrists like he wasn't sure they were actually there. Clint wasn't sure either; it was pretty unbelievable. "Can Thor heal like that?"

Loki looked up at him. Clint hated that he was actually grateful to see the little shit smirk again. "He carries my infusions, and they heal great injury with his direction, but he himself practice it without a muffling force? He is receptive, and hardy, that is all, and would never lower himself to this when a strap and a little rest does the same."

"There's something seriously wrong with you people, you know that, right? I mean, seriously? Do you have any idea how much we pour into medicine around here?" Stark was flailing his arms to get the stink out of the air, bending over Loki to check the bracelets. "These don't hurt, right? I mean, can you make powders that work on people? Oh, god, can you cure cancer? Regrow limbs? Are you just a giant mass of stem cells? Can you detach one and make it grow into a replica of you?"

"Temporarily," Loki said.

"Really?" Banner was all excited now. "So when you said it was a substitution if it was real, it was actually cloning?"

Loki wiggled his fingers, very serious, an eyebrow raised. "Magic. I am the greatest sorcerer of the realms, and such is child's play for me. You do realise Thor will never treat your bodies with honour should you be successful in your attempts to bribe me."
"There's nothing worth helping us. For us. Or you," Clint said, because the way he talked about it -- this wasn't the Tesseract, or the sceptre, or a spear. This was something part of Loki, literally under his skin, and doing this shit for them, deciding who got to live and die and why and how, would just be turning into his dad all over again, taking another throne he didn't want. Earth wasn't Asgard, and when it came to some decisions that just didn't matter.

Clint knew from experience there was nothing worth putting yourself back exactly where you'd started.

"No," lifting his chin, voice pleased in the way that skated fingers of memory across the back of his neck. "There is not. You are mortal, all of you, and so you shall remain. That is a law beyond my trespass."

Selvig turned from the machine and folded his arms. "So, Jane -- Thor will just leave her to die?"

Loki inclined his head. "As he has many before her, and no doubt many after. We are gods. Once we were your gods, and governed you, but that once is past even by Asgard's reckoning. Your lives are not our concern. None of you," calm and clear, "are our concern."

Stark huffed. "Come on, we just took out your army, that's got to win us points."

"Foolish mortal. My army. Not Asgard's. If you were a threat, Odin would be here with his army, and his swords, and his mercy, and you would kneel in the ashes of your destruction as it has been so before and will be again wherever he goes. And he is not."

"So if we get any better at killing things, we're going to end up vassals. Officially vassals." Banner was wedged awkwardly against the edge of the machine, arms folded. "That's ... it'd be like Jotunheim. Wouldn't it?"

"You flatter yourselves with the comparison."

Clint butted in. "So if you're not worried about us and you're just sitting around here 'cause you feel like it, what are you worried about enough that you're dumping gloves and maths on us? What's the 'real power'?"

"Did you truly imagine," Loki said, smile cold, "that I would fail without repercussions?"

"Thought Chitauri were too much of a hive mind to take it personally."

"They had a commander. Their threats were very specific." Loki spread his hands. "They will retrieve me and you are ... what is your lovely mortal term? Collateral damage."

Nat was going to love the crate Hill would buy her for winning that wager. Fuck.

"So if we want not to end up bugfucked, we have to protect you. Seriously? I'm thinking really hard about just shooting you now and turning over the body. You can't heal if we turn that up to a hundred percent, right? You'll die."

That got him a lifted chin and godly dignity. "If you believe it in your best interests."

Stark was at his shoulder now. "Okay, seriously, Barton, you might wanna lay off the threats. It's all very gung-ho and intimidating, but come on, this is lone ranger shit, this isn't Indiana Jones. He's bugfuck but he's our problem and killing him won't get rid of it, it'll just make us look bad. I'll make you do the team's PR for the whole goddamn year. I'll stuff you in a suit and put you on Good Morning America without hair gel, so help me --"
"I get it, Stark." The fletching was kissed warm against his cheek, and Loki was kneeling there, hands linked on his lap and still. Fucking. Smiling. Not even smirking. Just smiling.

Clint hated him. He'd never been surer of anything in his life.

He hated him too much to kill him, and he lowered the bow, smirking at the flash of surprise, the narrowed eyes. "I get it. He doesn't want to," Clint said, turning his head to Stark and watching Loki out of the corner of his eye. "He just thinks it'll be better if we kill him first. I believe him."

"Me too," Stark said, and made a face. "God, Barton, you need to stop doing that, I like these pants."

"Scared of a little murder, Stark?"

"Nah, just you," and Clint rocked back a little at that kind of honesty. Damn. They were in the same room as Loki, Loki, for fuck's sake, and the guy who turned into the Hulk, and Stark thought he was the scariest one there.

The worst part was Clint couldn't tell him he was wrong. Loki wasn't even human, wouldn't know humanity if it bit him in the ass. Banner and the Hulk were mostly different people, and Clint didn't have an excuse. He'd just be someone who executed a prisoner in cold blood right in front of them without orders to do it and they'd all have to live with that person on their team, Clint included.

His throat was too thick to talk properly. "Who the fuck do you think I am, Stark? Jesus."

"I think you've got a hell of a lot of reasons to want him dead and they've got names. Some of them were probably your friends." Stark pushed at the tip of his bow and Clint dropped it further, letting more slack into the string. "I dunno if SHIELD policy covers that."

"I don't have orders. I won't."

"You, uh, you sure about that?" Banner said.

Clint didn't actually know. But he knew Nat knew, even if he didn't, and she'd said he wouldn't. So he'd trust her and go with it like usual and just hope it didn't blow up in his face.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm sure."

Arrow back in the quiver, the bow slung onto his back, and Loki wasn't smiling anymore, was pale and small and dull-eyed, the metal on his arms the only bright thing in the cell. "Sorry, buddy. You're not getting your mercy kill today."
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Familial dysfunction.

She came while Loki was sleeping, the screen under his chin and his forehead pressed to Steve's knee while Steve sketched.

It was the click of the guards' guns that alerted him, the sudden brightness of the cell's lighting, and Steve looked up to see a very tall, very blonde, very beautiful woman who looked like she was someone's mother.

Steve reached for his shield and tried not to talk too loudly, jiggling his knee against Loki's head to wake him up. "Please identify yourself."

"I am Frigga, Queen of Asgard. I would speak to my son."

He felt a little faint at the idea of meeting an alien queen and tried to remember his manners.

"Pleasure to meet you, ma'am. I'm afraid he's not awake yet." Steve shook his shoulder. "Loki? Loki."

"No," he muttered.

"Loki, it's important. Your mum's here."

"Fine, what?" His head snapped up and he recoiled, stammering and getting to his feet, throwing the blanket over the screen and pulling down his shirt. "Mother. Mother?"

So she wasn't lying about being his mother, and Steve gestured the guards to be on standby.

"My son," gentle, and Loki flinched, half-turning and hugging himself. "My son," firmer now. "We have much to discuss."

Steve watched her, how she carried herself -- like a queen -- and it was a lot like Thor, a little unreal standing in clothes more expensive than Steve had ever seen, even on Tony, and so bright against the grey walls. He wanted to like her, he really did.

But Loki looked like it hurt just having her there, and Steve cleared his throat. "Look, you don't have to talk to her if you don't want to."

Loki stared at him in utter disbelief, and leaned close to hiss. "You are mad. She is the Queen."

"It's what I'm here for. I'll escort her out if you want me to."

"Steve? Who is that?" over his comm, he wasn't sure exactly who -- Clint, maybe Doctor Selvig. All of the Avengers monitored the cell as often as they could.

Steve touched it, making sure it was directed only to his ear, not on speaker like some of the comms. "I'm fine. It's his mum."
"What?"

"We'll be right there," Agent Romanova now, and Steve lowered the volume on Tony's demand to know what was going on, feeling the queen's gaze on him.

Steve got up. "Ma'am, if you're here to take him to Asgard, I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave."

Loki made a panicked noise behind him and stepped in front of Steve. "They know nothing of manners, Mother."

"So I see," she said, and for all that she was gentle and kind-looking, she was implacable. "I shall enter, shall I?"

"I'd really appreciate it if you stayed outside the room for now, ma'am," Steve said, noticing the twitch of Loki's shoulders. "It's protocol."

"Hmm. He seems kind enough," she said to Loki. "Have you made friends here on Midgard?"

"They mean nothing to me," Loki said, softer than Steve had ever heard him. It was like he was regressing, or reverting, becoming someone else. "I swear to you, Mother, they mean nothing."

"Indeed?" very soft. "Then how did you come by your son? Child, you know it's not safe. Don't you?"

Loki started shaking, and Steve very carefully touched the blade of his shoulder, shield still held in front of him where the queen wouldn't see his hand moving, and pressed as carefully as he could, then held it against the softness of his shirt.

A reminder he was there and prepared to hit her in the face with his shield if he had to. "I'm in place," Agent Barton said in his ear. "Nat tipped off the director."

"A misguided act, Mother. I believe they mean to be kind, but they think I care for a monster. Amusing, isn't it?" Loki chuckled. "I really cannot abide gossip. What is it you do here?"

"I ask you home. My weaving foretold of great danger, and I wish you safe."

Steve would have believed every word if he hadn't just been reminded that this was the same woman who'd allowed such things to happen to her son.

As it was, he watched her step closer with a wary eye and kept his hand on Loki's back. "My child. Are you not tired of this pretense? You must know you are in great danger. These Midgardians cannot hope to protect you."

"Back off, lady." Tony, in full suit and palms open, and Steve was so happy to see Agent Romanova come up behind him. Barton was probably somewhere in the room, keeping an arrow on her. "He's not going anywhere."

Queen Frigga turned her head, incredibly beautiful earrings swaying against her neck. "I am his mother."

Loki leaned into Steve's fingers, and Steve felt him tense as Tony snorted. "Uh, no, you might've raised him, okay, but that doesn't make a damn bit of difference. He's not. Going. Anywhere."

"You said you had not made friends, child," gentle and chiding, and Loki flinched back against Steve.
"I have not, Mother. I am a prisoner, as you see. They are very possessive of property they believe belongs to them."

"Yeah, we're not friends," Tony said. "But we're better than you lot. Back off."

Her profile was very regal. "I don't believe you are in a position to threaten me, Anthony Stark."

"You telling me this is a diplomatic mission, ma'am? I don't believe it for a second." Director Fury coming up the stairs, coat billowing and deeply unimpressed. Romanova stayed battle-ready by Tony's side. "I'm Director Nick Fury. I'm in command here."

She smiled, but mostly she looked sad. "My son is very young, Nicholas. I thank you for your care, but I very much wish to take him home now. Where he belongs. I assure you his behaviour will be dealt with."

Steve held his breath, and he saw Tony cross Iron Man's fingers. Loki quivered against the shield.

It was all up to Director Fury now.

"I've got a couple of problems with that, ma'am. I'll have to see some identification for a start. I'm not in the habit of releasing prisoners to just anybody."

"Of course," very slowly. It was like she wasn't expecting to be challenged, and Steve figured in most places, they knew about her, or what she looked like. Here, too. She was just too queenly to be anyone else. But Director Fury wasn't most people. "What do you require?"

He folded his arms. "Proof you're who you say you are, ma'am. You got any?"

"It is not needed," she said very kindly. "I am Frigga, Queen of Asgard, and I am here for my son."

"I don't know that, do I?"

She looked vaguely concerned, turning away so all Steve could of see of her was her back, tall and strong. "Of course you do, Nicholas."

"The hell is she doing?" Barton said in his ear. "Some kind of mojo?"

"Doesn't matter if I do or not, ma'am. I still got a whole lot of other problems, and I'm hanging out for some explanations, if you'd care to give me some."

"I will not answer questions that threaten the safety of my realm," she said. "Not that kind of question, ma'am. Your son, Loki, I've got some concerns. I'll need them satisfied. Like the gag and chains, for one."

"You have very generous hearts, to remove the apparatus and show such concern for my youngest," she said warmly. "I thank you. Loki can be a little troublesome from time to time, and I would avoid further damage to your realm if I could."

"Ma'am, I wasn't asking, I was stating. My question's 'why did Thor have them to start with??""

"They were needed. I do not expect you to understand our ways. It can be very difficult sometimes, to know if one thing or another is what is right. It is right to have your doubts, Nicholas. It is not right to keep me from my child."

"Say we hand him over to your custody. What happens then?"
"He will be reprimanded, of course. What he has done here is inexcusable, and I hoped he knew better. I am very sorry your realm has come to such grief at his hands."

Steve swallowed, trying to understand. Loki was pressed tightly against the shield now, shivering so hard Steve felt it through vibranium, and she sounded gentle, and much more even-handed than Steve expected an Asgardian to be, but there was something wrong.

She sounded gentle, but she wasn't being kind to Loki. He was reacting like she was destroying him, and obviously hearing things than Steve couldn't.

"It wasn't entirely his fault, ma'am," Steve said. "We think he was being partially controlled. There was a sc--" That got him a sudden, vicious pinch to his thigh that could've only come from Loki. "--scenario we came up with to explain his actions, and we think he was being threatened somehow."

She turned back to them, for all the world a caring, devoted mother, and Steve couldn't see what was wrong with this picture, but something was.

"Is this true, my child?"

Loki twitched a nod. "It was Midgard or Asgard. I -- I am sorry, Mother. I did try."

"It is not your fault it came to naught," she said soothingly. "Armies, the Tesseract -- it's so much responsibility. You are much too young for these things. I don't blame you, child. It will be all right."

Loki flinched again and gave a jerky nod, downcast. "I am so sorry."

Asgard. They didn't know about the Chitauri. How did they know? How did she know Loki was in danger?

Had Frigga known about the Chitauri and told Thor? It sounded like she was awfully prophetic. But if she knew about it before, why hadn't Asgard found the Tesseract?

"You trusted me with the throne, Mother," painfully small. "You told me I could hold it for Father."


"Did you?" inaudible. "Did you miss your Jotun relic?"

"Loki," shocked. "I never thought that. You have always been my child."

"Then why --" Loki shook his head. "Why did he not tell me? If I am in such danger, why has he not come for me?"

She smiled reassuringly, warm and sure. "Oh, Loki. It is as I said. Your father has a purpose for all he does. I did tell you before, did I not?"

"Ma'am, I think I've heard enough," Fury said. "I'm gonna have to ask you to leave."

"You refuse me?" incredulous. "Look at him! He is so thin and ill. You are hardly treating him at all well."

Fury was stalwart. "We're doing our best, ma'am."

"I will take my son home, Nicholas."
"Not today."

"You got that right," Tony said, and Romanova nodded from beside him.

Steve spoke up. "Ma'am, if he doesn't want to go with you, we won't allow it."

"Of course he does, Steven. Don't you, child? Wouldn't you like to come home? That bed doesn't look very comfortable."

He was hugging himself. "I will not bring danger to you?"

"Oh, no, we're perfectly prepared. Have you forgotten our brave warriors so easily? They will never be able to hurt us. They won't find you. I promise."

"I ... and Father?" timorous as a frightened mouse. "Will he welcome me?"

She smiled. "He will come around. He misses you too. We all do. We mourned you. You are our son."

Loki was silent, and after what felt like endless heartbeats, he clutched Steve's wrist. "No," like it broke him. "I'm not."

Frigga leaned closer in concern. "Oh, my son. What have they done to you? Whose voices have you listened to? You look so ill. Eir will help you be rid of them."

"I am not," fierce and shaking, "your son. I am not Odinsson."

"You cannot be Laufeyjarson," almost a caress. "We are your family."

"I am not yours. I am sorry, Mother. I am not yours."

"Lady, just go home," from somewhere above. "You're digging a hole to nowhere."

Her mouth tightened with temper. "To roost in a nest of one's own making is a coward's way, Clinton."

"Oh, my bad. Here I thought I was supposed to be shooting you."

"Stand down, Agent Barton." Fury had his arms folded again. "It's clear to me he's not coming with you at the moment. I'm open to visiting, but you've got to warn us beforehand. We've got things to do around here."

"I will not overstay." She looked over her shoulder at Loki. "I hope you will come home with me one day. Where you belong. Thank you for your -- hospitality, Director Fury. I am glad to meet the remarkable peoples whom saved this realm from disaster. Farewell, my son. Never doubt that I love you."

For a second the Tesseract flashed in her hand, and she was gone.

Loki turned against Steve and threw his arms around his neck, face buried against his collarbone and quickly soaking it with chill.

"Anybody else feel like we just told off Mother Teresa?"

"That ain't funny, Stark. Get down here, Barton. I want you and Romanova liaising with Agent Hill. I want to know our options. Captain, see if you can get some answers out of the kid when he's settled
down. Stark, with me. You got a briefing."

"Can't I get the suit off first?"

"Two minutes. Fail to show and I'll cut your porn feeds."

Tony whined, but scuttled, and Fury followed him, Barton dropping down and falling into step with Romanova on the other side.

"Take care of him, Cap," through his comm. "Might talk to you. He gets pretty chatty."

"I'll try," Steve said, not really sure what to do with a traumatised kid he couldn't just tell to buck up and get on with it, but playing it by ear mostly worked out so far. "Good luck, Agent."

"You too, Cap. I've got vodka if you want it."

"Uh, no thanks. Thanks, though." Steve muted his end with a slid of his jaw over his unoccupied shoulder. "Loki?"

"Silence, mortal," Loki mumbled, stuffy with tears. "I am not crying."

"Just wanted to know if you needed anything."

"I need nothing from you! Silence!"

Steve took the hint and once Loki had cried himself mostly to sleep, peeled his frozen face off his shirt and put him to bed.

He was tucking him in and fluffing the pillow and making sure Loki's toes were toasty when Loki cleared his throat with a noise like a clogged engine and pulled the blanket to his ear, curling back into his usual comma formation and ruining Steve's work. "I killed my mother."

Steve didn't pause in tucking him in all over again even though his brain went shocky for a moment. He what? "Did you?"

"Mhm. Laufey-king. King of Jotunheim. I had a plan and it failed. I knew he was my mother when I killed him at Odin's bedside."

"Did he know?" Steve thought he had the right pronoun, but he wasn't sure.

"No. I spoke to him a very little, but that was all. He did not like me."

Steve smoothed the blanket over his back and tucked it in behind his shoulder. "You're not easy to like, you know. Some people are like that. They grow on you."

Loki shifted deeper into the blankets. "Have I?"

"Not really. Give it more time." Steve brushed his hair out of his face and got up, signalling the lights to be dimmed. "But I'll be right here if you need anything."
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

Loki, you moody little shit. (This is pretty much half what I say when I'm writing. "Loki, you little shit!")

Discussion of genital mutilation, gender binary and related terms, associated traumas.

Bruce knocked, and Loki looked up from where he sat crosslegged on the floor, a tray balanced on his knees and styrofoam containers scattered around him.

They'd stacked the tray with lots of different stuff, thoroughly labelled with names and ingredients -- they'd tried to keep it to stuff they could actually label without getting too many embarrassing questions about chemical makeup -- and told him to take what he liked and put aside what he didn't, and from the stack of empties he'd either decided to eat it all or he really didn't care much.

There were some things set aside, too. Clam linguine, but not the tomato and spinach ravioli. Fried rice was half-eaten, but tom yum was scraped clean and the ruins of a pomegranate taken apart for every last seed were scattered in its box.

"Just checking how you're doing," Bruce said, and at Loki's imperious beckon, still chewing, he went in and crouched at his side, files open on his tablet. He wasn't taking chances with this one. If Loki could affect them, that meant he had too much power.

"So, uh, no side-effects? The bracelets aren't too tight, too small, too loose?"

Loki shook his head, fingers held in front of his mouth, and swallowed. "No. They are of no inconvenience."

"No dizziness, nothing unusual?"

A shrug. "I have difficulty when I wake. Otherwise no."

"So when you sleep it's dormant?"

"Unless I have many spells active, yes. It is possible to drain oneself overnight, but I haven't committed such acts of rank idiocy in an age."

Somebody was chatty. Bruce took notes and held out a hand. "Could I check your arm, please? I know you healed it, but uh, for my own satisfaction."

That got him a considering look and a wrist lightly placed in his palm. The other hand went to work with a fork and a row of dolmades, neat careful bites and slow chewing as he frowned and apparently decided he liked them, but not enough to finish the box. It was set aside for another, seals broken with cool efficiency.

Bruce examined his perfectly cooperative, perfectly intact arm and managed to just barely squeeze the tip of his little finger under the edge, even if he couldn't make it through, and though he didn't really doubt Tony's work, what he'd seen yesterday made him paranoid about edges. He couldn't feel
anything sharp, though, or even a snag when he ran his fingernail under it. Good. They wouldn't rattle or catch.

"No pain?"

Loki shook his head, sipping kefir out of a towel-wrapped thermos. "Few doubt my skills after the first showing."

"I'm a doctor," Bruce said. "I kind of have to ask stupid questions."

"The head of our healing hall, Eir, said much the same." Loki slanted a glance Bruce's way. "She considered me uncooperative."

Bruce couldn't help but laugh. "I could tell her a whole lot about uncooperative. You're, uh, this might be news to you, but uh, you're not it. Why'd she say that?"

"I refused to let her castrate me," Loki said blandly, licking foam off his lips, and Bruce almost dropped his wrist.

"What? Oh. Because you're hermaphroditic?"

Loki raised an eyebrow. "Hmm."

Bruce shook his head. "Yeah, okay, sometimes surgeons do that, but I have other stuff to worry about. You know, grenades, limb amputation, exotic infections. Usually if an adult's asking me they're pretty desperate, but genital surgery needs followup I can't manage on my own, and uh, I haven't been many places with that, so I just do mastectomies and leave it to the nurses when I move on. It's not so hard as people think to find good amateurs."

"What is mastectomy?"

"Uh, removing breast tissue. I ... well, you know, do one for shrapnel, do one for a man, either way they'll probably die without it and it's never like my tables are empty anyway." Bruce glanced around. "Until now. This is the cleanest facility I've seen in, uh, five years, actually. I'm a little -- it's a little boring."

Loki smiled, but it was strained. "No, no, she was not castrating in the sense you think. I have not had one of these procedures. No, it was my quim she found offensive."

Bruce winced. "We -- we don't like that word. I don't like that word. Can you, uh, not?"

"Cunt, perhaps?" eyebrow cocked.

"No." He heard himself making exasperated noises and wondered if this was when Loki was going to try to chop his head off and make him Hulk inside the facility. "You have a vagina and a vulva and ... some very unusual and I assume fully-functioning internal reproductive organs. There's nothing wrong with that. There's, uh," well, he couldn't say there wasn't anything wrong with Loki. "Nothing physically wrong with you."

That made Loki giggle. "I see," sly and wicked. "And otherwise?"

"I, I'm not qualified to comment," Bruce said, twitching a smile despite himself.

"Very good," Loki laughed. "Very good. Indeed you are not. None are."

Bruce put down his arm and went to the other side, Loki calmly shifting his fork. "You're in a good
"Midgard has some creativity to offer," Loki said, tasting tzatziki with a tongue in the pot and lifting a surprised eyebrow. "I still may very well toss you, as you say. Mortal wretch."

It was almost fond, which was bizarre, but not as much as the fact that Bruce was a little fond of Loki too, in an incredulous, Jesus-Christ-this-kid-what-the-fuck way. Especially like this. Note to self: feed Loki more things more often. He wondered if he'd like borscht. Buffalo wings. Pickled herring. Blue cheese. Brie. Arak. Apple pie. Brisket. Stark could probably buy a few international delis and diners and let Loki play in them for a while. Bruce kind of wanted to see his face when he tried tuna surprise.

"I must be both-handed. It is critical to the study of magic. Neither dominant or submissive." Loki stuck out his tongue at something and set it aside, scraping the tip of his tongue against his teeth. "It is a terrible quality in a man. To carry to the left is to be cursed."

Bruce asked a question that'd been on his mind for a while, ever since he saw the scans, ever since he'd heard Thor talk. He'd ... well, he hadn't been lying about it being all the same once he was operating, and he'd heard enough desperation from men so tightly wrapped their ribs were crushed and their lips turned blue with begging. "Are you, though?"

Loki narrowed his eyes at him and yanked his wrist away, and he looked hurt for a moment under the anger, hand rising. "You dare question --"

"No no no no. I'm not questioning your manliness. Don't punch me, don't -- I'm not questioning that. I'm asking what you think, okay? Like, do you, uh, feel that way."

That got him a face of utter confusion. "What?"

Bruce stared.

Had no-one ever, ever asked?

Of course they hadn't.

"I mean," trying not to babble, "do you feel like you're one or the other?"

Loki blinked, swallowing hard, and he clutched the thermos of kefir very close. "How could I be? I am not. You have seen my deformities. I cannot be. But I must. A failure of a man is still a man nevertheless," and it sounded like he was trying to convince himself, like he'd been trying to convince himself for a long time.

"Not ... necessarily."

"It is so in the eyes of Asgard," very sharp.

Bruce shook his head and pointed to the trays. "Uh, you're not on Asgard. You know, I, I don't think Asgard has vindaloo. And, you know, that's not what I meant."

Loki narrowed his eyes. "Say what you will in your defense."

"Okay, well, we have a concept, it's uh, it's not all that new, it's really old actually, but it's uh, bigender. Two genders. Being both. You wouldn't be the first by a long shot. We're kind of rediscovering, uh, people can be really flexible about identities. Uh, it's -- it's well, it's just a thought,
like, uh, the way you were talking about hand dominance, it reminded me of that."

"Truly?" He looked very lost, eyebrows squinching in probably the most genuine expression Bruce had ever seen from him. It was just too unattractive to be on purpose, coming from someone vain enough to complain when his clothes weren't the right shade of green.

"Yup. It's not a utopia or anything, far from it, you're right about the surgical corrections, but it's something. Can I, uh, your arm, I wasn't finished."

Loki considered him, mouth pinched very tight, then laid his wrist in his palm again, fingers curled. "You talk," slow and sure and warning, "far too much."

Bruce took the hint and backed off. "I think you're the first person to say that. You know, I, uh, actually I don't think you talk enough. Not in the nasty way like you did, just ... in general."

"You are also the first to say so." A little of the humour was coming back, which was a relief. Loki might be in a better mood, but he was still ridiculously volatile, and it was difficult enough dealing with him without forgetting that. "How come you by this knowledge?"

"I spend a lot of time around scared, desperate people in pain who really, really need someone to talk to and most of the time ... I'm it. A lot of the time they're dying, so -- you know, I have a lot of last rites memorised. And sometimes they just need to know they're not alone. In more than one way." Bruce shrugged. "I hear a lot."

"Your talk of fear is strange to me." He went back to the clams and balanced one on his fork. "Death is an honour. They died in battle, did they not?"

Bruce realised he was missing something very crucial here. "Do you have civilians on Asgard?"

"Not all are warriors, but they are trained, and go forth to a glorious death once they are infirm. It is the way. To die without honour shames their family."

"So you have to have battle, all the time. Or ... there's no way for them to do that. But seriously, everyone has to die fighting in a war?"

Loki shrugged. "No. To take one's own life without recourse, or to victory. There are other methods, but they are considered underhanded. Do I now see disgust in your eyes?"

"Uh ... sort of. I'm, uh, I'm not a big fan of ... glory. I guess I don't really understand." He felt cold. They had to keep fighting. Their entire society rested on being at constantly at war. No wonder wishing peace meant the same as 'if you do things we don't like you doing and you get attacked with a 'higher form' of war, it's your fault'.

And they thought they could find commonality with these people? Was SHIELD crazy? Were they all crazy?

Loki was watching him, cool and remote and very, very haughty. He looked like the screenshots of his mum talking to Fury. Bruce tried to smile, but it felt lopsided. Probably looked awful. "I spend a lot of time in the aftermath trying to save people. So I'm kind of biased."

"Do you not have difficulties with Anthony Stark?"

"You heard about that? Yeah, of course you did, you did research or something. Uh ... yeah. Yeah, I do. Not as many now, but -- yeah. It's awkward. I'm ... generally awkward anyway. He likes me for some reason. I don't really know why."
Loki looked like the mechanics of friends were mysterious and kind of intriguing, examining him like a bug all over again. It was a bit creepy but Bruce figured friends were as mysterious to Loki as they'd been to Bruce when he was in school. If he'd had the chance to ask adults how the fuck friends worked he'd have taken it and run with it, too. "Do you return his affection?"

Bruce wobbled a hand, still checking the bones of his wrist for soundness, pressing into the palm and watching for his reflex. "Yeah. I -- yeah. I'm not good at this stuff, never really got the hang of it. But yeah, I think so." He patted his hand. "Everything looks fine. I'm impressed."

"Mortals are easily dazzled." Loki touched the clam pasta box, face very serious and vaguely earnest. "Is this to your liking?"

"Uh, sure," Bruce said, and took it when Loki held it out, unsure if to be afraid or actually kind of touched. "I need a --"

Loki handed him a fork and delicately dropped a dolmate on top of his pasta, then hesitated over the thermos arranged on his other side and gave Bruce the one with kefir, still a quarter-full.

He obviously liked it from the way he'd hummed while drinking it, so why he was solemnly handing it to Bruce with the rest of the fried rice, he had no idea.

"Thanks? Uh, thank you." Bruce toasted him awkwardly. "Uh, it's a salutation. Here, clink. The rims touch together. Not very hard." Loki delicately clicked a thermos against Bruce's, frowning a little in concentration. "Salud."

"Salud," Loki echoed, and waited until Bruce drank before he did.

It was actually pretty good kefir, and the clams and rice were decent even if he was very, very confused.

"So, uh, why are you being nice to me?" Bruce asked. "You're not exactly known for being generous. I mean, I appreciate it, but still."

"Can I not attempt it? Do you think me incapable?" Loki said, and if Bruce didn't think better, he'd think he was offended.

"Well, of course you can, it's actually kind of refreshing, I'm just wondering if it's a lead-up to stabbing me in the back or something. Literal ... stabbing."

Now Loki was just frosty. Literally. It was cold. Either he was doing a great job of pretending to be bothered or he actually was. "No."

"Oh." And now Bruce actually felt kind of bad. "Sorry. Shouldn't've asked, huh?"

Loki shook his head and said nothing, grimly digging into the dolmates and biting off the ends with a vicious little snap.

He really felt bad. "Look, I'm sorry. I just don't ... I don't trust you. But uh, it's nice food, and uh, thanks for sharing. I mean it. I was pretty hungry, so, thanks."

"Your grovelling disgusts me," dismissive mood-flip, and the air warmed again. "Finish the meal, wretch. Your mortal form is hideous and I will not have it afflicting my eyes a moment longer than necessary." Bruce blinked, and he sniffed, waving an impatient hand. "Well?"

He raised his eyebrows.
Was Loki still trying to be friendly? With Bruce?

What for? Why?

Bruce was so confused. As far as he knew Loki thought of him as the Hulk, pretty much. And he'd just offended him.

"Okay ..."
One of the reasons Natasha liked Agent Maria Hill as much as she did was how removed she was from the situations that affected Natasha and the other operatives.

Hill wasn't a covert spy, wasn't a child soldier, wasn't exploited, hadn't been raped, was in fact raised in a loving family with well-acquainted siblings and parents who hadn't abused her and in fact seemed to like her. Hill talked about them like she was fond of them and they were fond of her. They met for dinner and encouraged her millitary service, and instilled a sense of morality Natasha was endlessly fascinated and baffled by.

Listening to Hill talk about her life was stranger and more alien than the actual aliens.

It made her an excellent sounding board when Natasha had doubts. She had them rarely and briefly but when she did Hill was the first and only person she talked to. Clint was better in general at discerning how much of a situation was personal projection and how much was fact, but when it came to figures of authority over children like parents and guardians and teachers he was worse.

Hill went to school. Hill had teachers who either liked her or were indifferent. She'd had a few bad teachers, and they weren't bad because they beat her or raped her or killed students when they didn't perform well enough, they were bad because they didn't teach the material.

It was all very surreal, and exactly why she was in Agent Coulson's office downing vodka shots while Hill patted her free hand and waited out Natasha's tangled, snarled feelings.

"I don't know what to do," she said eventually, and set down her third short, letting it wash through her belly, warmth crawling up her throat. "I know what SHIELD guidelines say I should do. But I don't know what I feel I should do."

Hill nodded. "What do you know right now?"

"I know Queen Frigga is the only one who has ever complimented Loki. I know he would do anything she asked if she asked. I know he's becoming attached to us the way we planned. I know he's so vulnerable he's a danger to himself." She poured a fourth and final shot. "I know he has nightmares about the Chitauri and anything that gives Loki nightmares when he handles his rapes so easily is something we should sit out if we can. I know he's targeting Stark."

"All right." Hill let go of Natasha's hand and spread it flat on the desk, laying her own hand on top and pressing down, trapping her fingertips under the base of her palm. It was their ritual, the only way Natasha could bring herself to talk. If she could pretend she was drunk, if she could pretend she was captive, if she could pretend there was nothing she could do, she could talk. "What does all that say to you?"

She tried to sort through impressions, threads, connections that went nowhere, stabilising lines frayed out of her reach.
Queen Frigga's appearance had shaken her, for reasons she didn't know and were connected to a flinching period when she was probably sixteen or so. It was in her file but she didn't feel like reading the multiple copies of the things she'd lost, field reports written by women she didn't recognise in handwriting she could still forge.

"Stark is being set up as Asgard's figurehead on Earth."

Hill blinked. "Is this an official theory?"

"I'll outline it and you tell me. I need a second opinion."

Hill held up her other hand, thinking it over, then pulled up a tablet, opened it, and began to write notes with a stylus. "Your supporting information?"

"The magic, the shield, choosing to use his building for the Tesseract's portal, giving Selvig the calculations to open another. The glove, the sceptre, their connection," listing it off on her hand, thumb to little finger and back again, and waited for Hill to catch up.

She cross-referenced Natasha's reports with SHIELD data in case it needed Fury's immediate attention, and the linking took a few seconds. Natasha liked it; it gave her time to gather things into the right order. Hill preferred things neat, from briefings to uniforms to glasses of gin.

"Sceptre, Loki's sceptre... got it," dotting an i. "Continue. These things mean?"

"They're all opportunities to demonstrate Stark's suitability to control Earth on Asgard's behalf."

She stopped again as Hill raised her eyebrows and caught up. "I presume this is where we really get into speculation. Tell me."

"My theory -- I don't know if this is absolutely correct --"

"It's all right, Nat. It's better we know. If you're wrong, all we've lost is some preparation time and a bit of vodka. I'm your opinion. Talk to me and I'll tell you what I think at the end."

"Fury doesn't deserve you."

"Of course he doesn't. That's why I'm here."

Natasha smiled at the private joke; it was a refrain between them for years now. "If Loki can offer Asgard a worthy vassal-king he can force Asgard's attention away from him and Jormungandr. Maybe even bargain for their lives eventually. Setting it up so he was the vassal-king didn't work out." She broke off and downed the fourth, putting it down with a thump and licking her lips. Hill continue to write, the stylus squeaking unhurried cursive.

"How would this happen?"

"If the arrangement with Stark as vassal was finalised with clauses stipulating Asgard's obligation to come to the aid of its vassals, Asgard would be forced to send warriors to defend Earth if they wanted to protect their reputation as All-Father, All-Seeing, etcetera, and particularly if Stark turns up in their court demanding aid."

"As he would."

"As he would. They would have only one viable response. Particularly since Asgard sees us as vulnerable children. They can't afford to lose another planet to parental neglect."
"And they would travel ...?"

"With the portal under Stark's control they would be able to come and go without risking the
Tesseract."

Saying it all felt strange. On her mind for so long, threads adding and adding until it was cocooned
in certainty, and now she was saying it.

Hill was considering her thoughtfully. "How would they know they could control Stark?"

"They wouldn't," Natasha said, and chuckled. "That's the point. That's Loki's point. They wouldn't
have to. Stark's a charmer, and very, very good at political expediency. It's what he does. If he
believed treating with Asgard, no matter what they've done to Loki -- maybe to protect Loki from
going back, maybe making it part of the agreement -- was the only way to save the world, he would
do it. He's amoral, not stupid."

"Is he in a position to believe it's the only course of action?"

Natasha thought back to a hopeless whisper in the dark. "I think so. Yes." She rolled her shoulders.

"That's very troubling news," was all Hill said, and she appreciated the lack of condemnation.
Natasha could almost like Stark if it weren't for the million things she disliked about him.

"All Loki needs now is someone from Asgard to offer Stark the opportunity. Loki's denied Frigga.
Asgard don't recognise SHIELD's authority, or anyone from the nations. Loki denied us as his
friends and Cap proved he was too ethically solid to be used. She hated that Clint was in the ceiling.
Director Fury proved himself to be someone Frigga couldn't manipulate directly. She can't
manipulate the Hulk either, he would just smash her. With all of these factors it has to be someone
else. There's only one person left."

"And it's Stark."

Natasha nodded. "Yeah."

Watching Frigga and Loki interact had been the clincher, the thing that sent her in a controlled dive
for her comm, an hour of Hill's time, and six sweeps of Coulson's office for any and everything that
might possibly be a bug or unauthorised audiovisual. Stark was the last person she wanted hearing
this.

"If I'm right Thor will be the one to make the offer."

Hill hummed, not quite agreeing, not quite disagreeing. "Why? Expand on that a bit, please."

She sighed. "He wouldn't talk to Odin about it; why ask Odin? He's in denial over Odin's motives,
and he's convinced he already knows them. But Frigga's quite good a manipulator. Not as good as I
am --"

"No-one's as good as you are."

"Frigga hasn't had to be. If we didn't have Loki's other sessions to compare to, if we didn't know
anything about Loki's history, it'd be easy to listen to it and say she was just a concerned mother. If
she'd turned up just after we captured Loki in Stark Tower and did what she'd done today, we'd
probably have turned him over to her without a second thought. Clint might've second-guessed it, but
we were all so tired and we hated him and wanted him gone. It would've happened."
"Frightening," Hill said.

"And Thor has no reason not to trust her. Thor wants us to be safe. Thor is to be king. For him to have enforceable authority for his protection of us makes perfect sense."

Hill finished writing and sat back with a low whistle. "That's ... ingenious. And desperate."

"I get the feeling Loki needs the Chitauri dead and finished if he's not to be tortured for the rest of his life. He's desperate."

"What do you need from me?"

Steady, reliable, sensible, ordinary Maria.

Natasha loved her so much.

"I need to know if I'm right. The likelihood I'm wrong."

Hill hummed in her throat. "It's complex, but it's also plausible with what's happened. That's as much as I can give you offhand." She looked curious. "Does he come off that manipulative?"

"Frigga does," Natasha said, crossing her ankles and leaning her cheek on the desk, letting it cool her face. It was a comfort to have Hill's hand pressing on hers. A comfort to say these things. To do her job and do it well. "It's not impossible he's learned from her."

"If Thor was Odin's favourite, was Loki hers?"

"Likely. Frigga certainly treated him like he should believe it." She closed her eyes and deliberately sagged out of bracing herself for the report, knowing she would notice. "Maria."

"Nat? What is it?"

Natasha cleared her throat, squeezing her eyes shut, and wished for a fifth shot but knew it was very unwise while she was this fragmented. "Loki might have more plans. I'm sure he does, even if this is the one we're dealing with right now -- he's too smart, too traumatised, to put his eggs in one basket. Backups of his backups. You know what the worst part is for me? All these plans I'm destroying over and over are all he's got. He never had a chance. He never had a fucking chance to be anything except a lying, thieving disappointment."

Maria took the pressure off Natasha's hand and held it instead, and sat with Natasha until the hour was up, squeezing her hand between hers and singing under breath in terrible Russian the lullaby Natasha once told her she'd wished someone would've sung to her.

She'd learned on her own without any prompting from Natasha. Natasha had forgotten it, brainwashing or just irrelevance or something else, but hearing her clear her throat and do it for the first time, awkward in her clear voice that couldn't quite get rid of the tone of command even when she was trying to keep a tune -- SHIELD was home.

It was her home. Her chance to be different because she wanted to be, not because someone told her she had to for the mission. And she couldn't give it to Loki because as long as he was a threat, it was her job to make sure no-one gave it.

Hill patted her hand again and got up. "I'll tell Fury."

"Thanks."
Natasha was tired of seeing herself in other people.
Tony gets to say some of the shit that was on his mind in the first ... 40 chapters, but particularly the first 30 or so.

Warning for mention and discussion of domestic abuse, dysfunction, alcoholism, drug addiction, murder, suicide, extreme self-destructive mental illness.

A note on the last there: spend time in an emergency department as a frequent visitor as you'll notice it's sometimes the people who want to die the most that survive things that would've killed anyone else, often multiple times. As I tried to make clear in this chapter, these people are generally a reflection of the triptych of mental illness, addiction and lack of support, not the issues alone.

Four in the morning and Selvig caught him triple-loading the coffee machine.

"What are you doing up?"

Tony shrugged, a wire he'd forgotten the reason for clenched between his teeth. He'd remember in a minute. "I do my best work at night. Coffee?"

"Not that sludge," Selvig said, moving closer and peering into Tony's cup. "How much have you had?"

"Despite my dashing good looks, incredible fashion sense and dark complexion, we're not actually related. You know that, right?"

Selvig trailed him to the table, leaning against it when Tony took his seat again and waved up Jarvis' projections. "I'm a bit worried about you, is all. What's got you up so late?"

"Eh. Thought I could tweak the shielding, since I managed to guess Loki's magic powers. I think I managed, if he's not faking again. We'll find out. Until then, tweak tweak and no-go. It's still a stupid glove. I don't get what I'm supposed to do with it, it's annoying. Jarvis, do we have any matches? At all? Please?"

"No known elements, sir."

Tony sighed. "Well, fuck. You know, sometimes -- do you ever feel like your life is run by a bunch of careless shitheads that don't care if you live or die and kidnap you to work in a tent for hours and just ... slave away your brilliance and just don't give a shit 'cause they're so fucking self-absorbed?"

"Constantly," very dry, and ha, Selvig had a cup anyway. His coffee was the best.

It made it easier not to jump all the way down his throat, and Tony narrowed his eyes at him. "I heard that. I felt that." He wooshed his finger past his face. "Ziiiiing. Stop it. I don't have a sarcastic retort right now, you're making me look bad. Jarvis, give me a retort. No, wait, you -- nevermind, give me the vibro schematics."
"You can't keep doing this."

Tony blinked and looked up. "Wait, you're still here? I thought we were done. Definitely done. Weren't we done?"


"Yessssssss...?" Tony drawled, waggling his fingers. "Get on with it."

"Bruce told me you've been obsessed with getting the portal up and running. We're months away from a prototype, let alone a functioning piece. There's no point destroying yourself over it."

"Uh, that'd be true, except, as you keep conveniently forgetting and I keep having to remind everyone, I. Am. A. FUCKING GENIUS. Hello? Do I just talk to myself? Does no-one fucking pay attention? Genius!" He rolled his eyes at Selvig. "Two weeks, tops. Couple more days for a functioning model. I've got about twenty tower reactors ready to go for whenever we get it up and running, sooooo, Mr. Doubting Thomas, why don't you go sit in the corner and feel bad? I'll make you a dunce hat if you want."

"Why is it so urgent to you? You said it was a year for Thanos."

"Optimistically, I said. Do I strike you as an optimistic person? Is it my big brown eyes? We need a way to get Thor back here. We need a way to send him off. I am not having the cube on this planet one second longer than necessary, okay? No. No cube. No. I don't like her turning up wherever she pleases. This is an alternative. I am making it viable. I'm not sure what you're missing, here, enlighten me, or maybe just don't and go away."

Selvig's hand landed on his shoulder, broad and square-fingered. "Listen, I'm your colleague. I'm the one that'll be checking your maths. You need to tell me what's going on. If I don't know what I'm looking for, I can't help you."

"Then don't," Tony snapped. "Take a vacation."

"That's enough."

"Wh-- hey!" The table was moving away, and Tony grabbed for it, then clutched the side of his chair and made noises he'd lie about for the rest of his life as Selvig dragged his chair over the bumpy floor and outside where it was fucking freezing, oh my God. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"That's my question, son."

Tony stared at Selvig, who looked -- mutinous, and kind of pissed off, and mostly just actually very genuinely and sincerely concerned, and Tony hated it because he always fucking folded when people got that look. Every fucking time, and now he was just going to do it again because he couldn't even do all-nighters right, yay Tony, you're a fuckup.

He clutched fistfuls of his hair, the pull reminding him to sit up straight and breathe and pretend he was Bruce. Meditate like Bruce. Not Hulk. Not big green scary thing. I am Bruce. I am nice and sweet and I hate sex and fast cars and everything fun in the world.

It just wasn't working.

"Am I the only one who remembers the Chitauri had a commander and he's kind of pissed off and probably knows where we are now? Like, if we don't have a way to target the fucking portal, where
do we fucking think it'll go first thing? I mean, really, do we just hope it won't open up into a black hole? Let's not, how about that? I am so sick and tired of this bullshit. I am doing my fucking best with very little information and I do not need this crap in my life and I hate that you remind me of my dad and I hate that you call me son and I hate that you're not actually a douchebag because you don't deserve my crap, nobody does, nobody, but it's all I've got and you'll just have to put up with it, I am under so much fucking pressure you don't even fucking know, seriously, who the fuck do you think does your PR and your machinery and your fucking funding to research this bullshit, like seriously, I pay your fucking salary, half at least, and that's my fucking plane out there and I have to rebuild fucking Manhattan and my house, I actually liked that house, goddamnit, and I am so fucking sick and tired of people dying on me and killing themselves so I see it every time I fucking close my eyes and I am totally capable, okay, I am completely fucking functional and anyway none of you give a shit, that's fine, I don't care, you can all go fuck yourselves and leave me alone, you fucking soul-sucking assholes -- mfph."

Sweet Jesus, Selvig was hugging him, and Tony was clinging like a Carebear.

"This didn't happen," Tony said hoarsely, and coughed into his shirt. He was going to be manly. There was nothing unmanly about this. Just a manly embrace. They were sciencebros. Science dudes. It was okay, right? It was okay.

"Sure." Selvig was patting his back, Christ, and it was the best thing ever. Since Tuesday. Was it Tuesday? Maybe it was Friday. He actually didn't know. "Ah, kid, I didn't realise. But you've got a hell of a weight on your shoulders, don't you?" Rub, rub, a hard thumb against his shoulderblade scratching an itch, and it was awesome. "What's this about people dying?"

Tony huffed. "You don't read tabloids, do you? I mean, you ... you really don't. You read, like, The Journal of Thermonuclear Bumfuck for the Plaid Guy, right?"

"Something like that," Selvig said. "Care to explain to an ignorant astrophysicist?"

"Hah. Okay. My mum was a junkie and my dad was an alcoholic and they hated each other like burning," Tony said, and it never got any easier to say, but then again he didn't say it all that often. "It's common knowledge, comes up every once in a while. People like to speculate about my childhood." He made a face. "They speculate a lot. Anyway, it's all tabloids so far, they know this, everybody knows this. But the next stuff you're not actually allowed to repeat. To like, anybody. Ever. Okay? If you do I will hunt you down with my lawyers and they will shoot you and make you sling noodles in the Walled City or something, okay?"

"That doesn't exist anymore, I think."

"Well, you know, somewhere like that," irritable. "I'm telling a story, shut it. Anyway, I spent a lot of time finding my mum. It was like she took a fucking list and went through every single point. Radiator in the bath. Overdoses on pretty much everything. Lightning. I mean, seriously, lighting, she went out and tried for like three months, she had this whole plan going on. She -- she was pretty crazy after a while. I think she might've always been crazy."

"Tony, your father was brilliant. He would've known."

"She was sober when she married my dad. When she met him. I know she was. But, uh, Obadiah kept ... offering, the fucking fucker. Sometimes I think he killed her first. Anyway, lightning. It's a, uh, physics problem, but she never was all that good at it. I could've told her if she asked, but I was just the kid that found her."

"That's terrible."
"Dude, I'm not done. Seriously, I'm talking. Shut up. Story, story ... right. I found her a lot. Sometimes she just sat on my bed and I'd wake up to her next to me smiling like we were friends. Still can't stand waking up with women, it's a thing, you know. She was always like 'Good morning, Tony'," he sing-songed, aware of Selvig's arms tightening, the pause of his hand on his back and the short, horrified breaths.

"Good God," above his head. Tony pressed on. It was a good bet Selvig would probably never talk to him again, what with all the flatlining and whatthefuck and whatever.

"I'm sorry about the mess.' She always said that too. Didn't matter if it was her hair or her toe she'd ripped off climbing out the eighth story window, they're all welded shut now, everything above the second everywhere. Anyway, she just wouldn't fucking die. She wanted to, but she couldn't figure out how to seal the deal. You really wanna hear the rest? It's pretty gruesome."

"It's -- it's awful. But I don't think you're done, so why don't you tell me the rest? Might do you some good."

"Yeah. Too bad for you, huh? Loooooong story short, she killed my dad. He was driving drunk, she drugged his drink and fed him a ton of it, probably quaaludes or something, and ... boom, she got what she wanted. And on the sub I walked in on Loki and I handled it pretty much fine, you know, I'm the king of cool in a crisis, but seriously, he was fucking melting. I had muscle goop on my fingers. It sounded like when you take a really big shit and the toilet is like 'I reject this', you know? It's ... it's a bit stuck in my head, the whole thing. You know. My parents. General ... parental difficulties."

Oh, God, now he couldn't stop, this was terrible.

"Pathetic, isn't it? I should be used to this shit by now, I mean, come on, it's me, everybody shot up in my bathroom in college. I always had the good stuff. Lots of the good stuff. People went a bit wild, I guess. I went a bit wild. I was kind of stupidly naive in college, god. But that's, you know, college. Whatever. Anyone ever tell you you're really easy to talk to and also kind of really fucking annoying?"

"All the time," Selvig said, and squashed him, and -- and yeah, actually, he was pretty okay with this. Squishing was good right now. "You've had it pretty bad, haven't you?"

"A little bit," Tony said, and held up finger and thumb pressed together. "Like, that much. Most people have it worse. They're not genius billionaire playboy philanthropists or whatever. Sucks for them."

"Son, it's not a competition," and Selvig was patting him again. It was humiliating, mostly because Tony still really liked it. "She shouldn't have done that to you."

"Did it to herself more than anything. Isn't that the whole point?" Tony made awkward faces. "Are you going to be like ... crying? Are you crying?"

"No. I'm just sad for you." Selvig pulled him back, firmly, and oh God, there were going to be pity eyes, weren't there, he couldn't fucking stand the pity eyes --

Oh, huh.

Not, actually. Selvig just looked sad. And kind of angry, but Tony got the feeling it wasn't at him, which was just weird and actually a bit creepy, hello, he was right here. "Uh, sorry. For the whole, you know, puking my feelings on you." Tony nervously patted his shirt and picked off bits of lint,
grimacing. "Sorry."

"She shouldn't have done that, Tony," very firm. "I want you to listen to me. You shouldn't have had to see that. It's fine if it keeps you up. God, it'd keep anybody up, wouldn't it?"

"Dude, agents." Tony jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"Son -- Tony -- they're assassins. They're not exactly normal people, and that's why you're not going to watch them die if you sleep, or if you make a mistake on the first pass. We're scientists, we believe in peer-review." Selvig held up a finger. "I believe in peer review, and I'll go through your work with a fine-toothed comb until I'm satisfied everything's safe as you can get it. They won't die if you sleep."

"Well, that's great for them," Tony said.

"Son," very kind, gripping his shoulder, "she's dead. We're not talking about your mother. You're telling me she got moves like Miss Romanova? You think Agent Barton can't hit a target? Could she?"

Tony scoffed. "She liked rifles better."

"I know this is hard. It's hard for everyone. Two years ago I was just a normal astrophysicist with weird ideas riding herd on an astrophysicist with weirder ideas until we ran Thor over and got dragged into this mess, and right now I'm working on a goddamn dimensional portal. I've got alien maths in my head."

"Is it pretty?"

Selvig rolled his eyes and put his free hand over Tony's mouth. He was tempted to lick it, but refrained. Selvig would probably do something evil. He probably had a hidden evil streak.

"It's hard, Tony. It's even harder if you're on your own. Stop pretending you are. I'm telling you from personal experience here. Whatever you think you're proving, it won't help."

Tony cleared his throat and pushed his hand away. "Look, you're pretty smart, I'll give you that, you and Bruce together give me a run for my money on a really bad day, but I'm still the fucking genius around here and I've got the workload. I'm not complaining about that, I've not got any problems with that, it's fair. I am one of the most brilliant people on the planet. It doesn't matter, doc. You can't do what I do. Nobody can do what I do."

Selvig sighed, wiping his hand and putting them into his pockets, rocking on the balls of his feet. "On the engineering side, yes, I agree with you. But. But -- listen to me, son -- listen --"

"I'm listening," Tony muttered, feeling ridiculous for sitting on a chair at four in the morning in the goddamn desert. The wheels were probably full of dirt and shit by now.

"You've got a team that put up with you long enough to save the world and they're not pushovers. Lean on them a bit with the stuff that you don't have to do. Not everything you're doing right now is pure engineering. You're borrowing from my discipline, and I'm still better at it that you. Lean on me. I've got my tricks, so does Bruce. You need to stop going off half-cocked and consult us first. Bruce, me, somebody. Not Jarvis, someone with a body. You've got," grip shaking Tony's shoulder, "to trust us. We're here, and we're not going away. You're an asshole and we're staying because this is bigger than you. This is about the world, and you're trying awfully hard, but you're not the world yet and it's not about you. Got it? You got that? You can't keep doing this."
"I got it," and Tony cleared his throat, shaking his hands out in the air to ward off the urge to hug Selvig again and maybe be horribly grateful and buy him an island or something. "Can I go inside now?"

He put his hands on his hips, staring at him, and Tony squirmed.

"Take the chair with you."

"You're terrible," Tony said, but he minded a lot less when Selvig chuckled and followed him in, and helped him clean out the casters with a bit of wire, mostly because Tony kept whining about how it was his favourite chair and it was all Selvig's fault until he gave in. "You wanna know what I'm up to, for real? Come here, I'll show you. Jarvis, show him."
Clint sauntered into Loki's cell, not fooled by the studious brush of his fingers over Cap's sketchpad; he'd seen the flicker of his eyes from ten meters away.

"Bathtime. Actual bath today. Thought you might like that better. And we got your armour fixed up finally if you want it."

Loki got to his feet, watching him way more warily than the situation called for. "I would."

Clint decided to take it as a general yes and gestured him out of the cell, waiting as the SHIELD guards fell into a square formation around him, guns ready. "Come on."

It was a different room entirely, on a different floor. Less institutional. There still wasn't any privacy, of course, but at least it wasn't so hi-tech-cellblock-esque. And the bathtub was a thing of beauty, long and wide and white and probably could fit a weightlifter.

The guards peeled off to take stance, the lieutenant of the squad signalling that the guards outside the room were ready too. "You want bubbles?"

"What?"

Geez, no bubblebaths in Asgard? "I'll show you." He plugged the sink, poured in a bit of the liquid, and let the water run, frothing and foaming up white.

Loki blinked, reaching to touch it, and made a surprised noise when it popped and shifted, then grinned a bit when he scooped up some. "I like this."

"Want it in your bath?"

"Mhm." Loki bent closer, bright-eyed and curious, and poked it some more, rubbing it between his fingers to water and slick. Clint turned off the tap and let him entertain himself for a bit while he personally inspected the perimeter. He wasn't as familiar with this room and the setup, and he had a good guess the others weren't either.

It all checked out, though, and he came back, ready in case there was a bloodbath, in to see the guards staring impassively ahead and Loki perched naked on the edge of the bathtub, his back to Clint and waving his fingers through the stream of water bubbling from the taps set deep into the edge of the bathtub itself. With Loki's strength, ripping off normal taps and using them to bash Clint's head in was a distinct possibility. The fix did look kind of weird, though.

"I did not main, kill or injure anyone in your momentary absence," he reported as Clint slung his bow back over his shoulder. "Disappointed, Agent Barton?"

"Nah. Makes my life easier. Death means paperwork, usually. I'm not much of a pencil pusher, I leave that to the secretaries."
"So fond of processed wood. How do you report, then?"

He toed the wall and called up a chair to sit in. It wasn't a binding chair, but it was still thoroughly attached to the base structure just in case someone decided it might make a nice weapon or eight.

"Mostly I record my briefings, times and dates and all, and let someone with enough clearance type them up for the files. I just don't care enough about the wording. Not like I'm a great reader, anyway. Oral reports. You?"

"We do so in person." A minute shrug, bubbles dotting his arm. "In letters, if the need is great."

Clint pulled a bit of fabric and thread out of his pocket and settled in more comfortably, smoothing his thumb over what he'd already done and calculating his place while he let the needle dangle and spiral out the twist from sitting around in his jeans. "Yeah, we can't really do that. Used to be that way, a while back, but SHIELD's a global operation. Earth's big."

"It is larger than Asgard, much to your detriment," Loki said. "Your population teems as ants, writhing in your hives."

"I'm thinking you don't like us. Just a guess." Right, pattern. Find, thread, pull. Find, thread, pull. Running stitch always made him weirdly happy; something about the symmetry front and back, going over half and going over it again to finish it, tucking in his ends with careful wraps.

Backstitch had its place, but he didn't like it much for blackwork; it wasn't as interesting. Running stitch always looked like a jigsaw puzzle the first way around, and watching him solve it was one of the few ways Nat ever settled down on her really, really bad days, chin on her crossed hands and eyes fixed on the fabric, watching the pattern appear until she'd stitched enough of herself together along with his needle that she was ready to get up and do her job.

"I do not. I find you loathsome."

Clint eyed his back. "Fine by me."

Loki turned off the taps and got into the water, sinking into the bubbles with a grin that turned into a happy little snort better found on a little kid. "I like this," he reported, lifting an arm and apparently fascinated by the slow slide.

Watching him be so happy about a bubble bath was actually kind of pathetic, and Clint focused most of his attention to stitching, hooking a thumb in his thread as he pulled it through so it didn't tangle on him.

He hated tangles; they were the worst, really. Nat could pick them out of anything, but Clint just never got the hang of it. She couldn't tie good rope knots, though. Wire and spy stuff she was fine with, but old fashioned rope frustrated her.

Sitting around stitching while a teenage Norse god played in a bubble bath and guards kept their rifles ready wasn't something he'd ever expected to do with his life, but at least Clint was fed and housed and his feet weren't tired at the moment, so there were some major pluses to the weirdness.

Even if it was really fucking weird, given everything. By all rights Clint should be wanting to shoot him in the head. He did, actually, very much, but mostly he just wanted to take advantage of the break and the opportunity to sit down and drop his polite face, and that right there was the really sad part. Supervising Loki counted as a break these days.

Life. Well, what was he gonna do, take his bow and go home?
"What is it you have there?"

Loki was leaning against the edge now, bubbles on his head and his hair dripping over the edge. There was a little bit on his nose, and his shoulders were crested with it. Sort of like a really bad cosplay of a killer whale, actually.

Clint laughed. "Buddy, you got, uh, bubbles."

"Yes," and he looked so happy and pleased with himself Clint would've sold his soul and murdered Satan for a camera right then. He'd just have to get a still off the a/v later. Fortunately all their cameras were creepily good quality. "What is it you have?"

He figured there wasn't much harm in showing him, and flipped it up, stretching the edges a little. "It's for Nat. Romanova. She likes the dinky little intricate stuff and I like making it. Win-win."

"My -- the All-Mother weaves," Loki said, chin on his folded hands, so much like Nat on her bad days that Clint had serious deja-vu for a moment. Though Nat wouldn't be caught dead looking like that. "She fortells what will come."

Clint thought about that for a bit. "Is she any good at it?"

"Not at all," grin bright. "And not of late. I am far better a seer, but however I exercise myself, I see only death. She sees life. Life is far more fickle, and much more prone to chaos."

"You fuck with her, don't you?" Clint said, sneaking suspicion rising. Leaving aside the 'seeing death' thing -- the fuck? -- the word choice had to be deliberate. "You totally fuck with her. You mojo her loom or something."

Loki put on the worst fake-innocent eyes he'd ever seen. "Oh, me?" He put three fingers to his lips, a little spread, and drew the tips down across his smiling mouth. "No telling. I shall be very cross if you do."

"What's the," Clint repeated the gesture back at him.

"My lips are sewn," Loki informed him. "Yours, in this case. Symbolises secret-keeping."

Huh. Shouldn't Loki be way more traumatised about it? "We say sealed. I don't actually know why. Sewn makes way more sense."

Loki shrugged. "Language rarely does, and to force logic upon idiom is to diminish it. Best to turn its flaws to one's advantage instead and gain power where you may."

Clint pointedly eyed the surroundings. "How's that working out for you?"

"Quite well." He blew bubbles at Clint off his hand, and Clint waved them away in the face of his giggles.

"Your mum teach you about words and stuff?"

"Of course," like it was completely natural. "The king rules the realms. The queen rules the court. A man may use words as weapons if he but knows his rules and best insults his opponents. Words which cut without notice are a woman's weapon. Men want their insults to be noticed." Loki tipped his head, bubble-crown sliding down his hair. "Your Romanova is not ill-skilled in that arena," grudgingly.
"She's good," Clint said. "Smart as a whip. I'm not so much, I just shoot stuff."

Loki lifted an eyebrow. "Oh. I must have imagined your strategies, then?"

"I've got a niche, and I own it. Call it a nest if you want. Best arrow specialist in the world, that's me. I think it suits."

It was weird to talk about it like it didn't still hurt. It was weird to hear Loki talk about it at all. He wanted to punch him so badly for mentioning it, but he just looked ridiculous right now, like a little kid, slick hair and shoulders and bouncing bubbles on the back of his hand, and it wasn't the first time Clint spared a kid from a well-deserved clip round the ear because they were just too funny right then.

"How is it you do this?" Loki was squinting at the fabric. "I see no guides. Even a weave must have a warp to guide its weft. The image is in your mind?"

"Yup. I know what I want to do, it's all up here," tapping his temple, "I just got to get it all down. One stitch at a time. See this part? You're looking at half of it. This here is what it looks like whole. I'm filling in this stretch at the moment. You're actually interested in this stuff?"

Loki rolled his eyes. "Do I seem in the habit of asking after things I find uninteresting?"

"Gonna assume that's rhetorical," and smirked at the glare he got. "Keep your britches on. Here. Watch the needle. In, and up, and pull, and it completes the line. See the other side? It's a mirror, or it is if I've got my counting right. So we turn this corner, come up here, down here, and now we've got a spiral that matches."

"It is to be symmetrical?"

"Yup."

"Oh." Loki wrinkled his nose and lost interest. "How tedious."

Clint rolled his eyes right back. "Dude, you go around in armour. I've seen it. It definitely takes you more than five minutes to put on."

"Generally I am assisted."

"Yeah, well, I'm not helping you, and I'm definitely not polishing it." He waved a hand, intentionally dismissive, and smirked when Loki tried to bore a hole in the side of his head with pure outrage, humming under his breath as he continued with his offensively symmetrical cross-stitch.

Of course, because his life was just ... life, he ended up helping anyway after Loki reluctantly got out of the de-bubbled tub, dried off, and clicked his fingers and said things like "my armour" and "immediately" and "rude peons" through the towel Clint preemptively dumped on his head the moment Loki opened his mouth.

"Insolent fool," but he started to dry his hair, which was the main goal so Clint would call it a success, and various pieces of armour were carried in and set down, along with weird undergarments and enough straps and buckles to outfit a fetish expo.

A lot of them were in places that Loki wouldn't be able to reach, especially as the armour was layered on, and Clint grumbled to himself and got a crash course in Asgard armour from an increasingly annoyed Loki that ended up with them shouting in each other's faces about fashion.
Clint really hadn’t expected the last straw stopping him from balls-out screaming back at Loki to snap over, not anything sensible like mass murder or ethics or mindcontrol, but the idea that Loki positively could not live without sparkly golden accessories. But there it was.

Eventually they compromised with the Asgard form of underpants, the leather pants, three undergarments and two layers of outer armor, and one of the shiny things Loki called bracers and definitely no shoulder cap thing.

Loki was sulking, but at least he looked more himself, whatever that was. More confident in being a giant pouting baby or something.

It was only the memory of fighting really hard with a client’s sister about the legitimacy of hammer pants and being on the totally legit side that stopped him from actually deciding to go through the a/v, grab a still, caption it AT LEAST HE’S DRESSED and leave it on Fury’s desk. That and Fury had way too much embarrassing documentation of Clint’s hideously forgettable (Christ, he hoped someone managed to forget) teenage wardrobes.

He finished the last buckle on his shoulder and circled him. It wasn’t anywhere near as bulky, but it was definitely along the lines of ‘representative of Asgard on his day off’. "That's it, right? Tell me that's everything, I swear to god if it's not --"

"It is," Loki said, very put-out. "You are in no position to complain."

"You're going to your room," Clint told him, shaking a finger. "You're going to your room, and you're going to piss off nobody until dinnertime. That's two hours. No-one. I don't want anybody breaking down my damn door complaining about you, understand?"

Loki stuck out his tongue. "I will not comply with such idiotic restrictions."

"Okay, you know what, I'll have that bracer back. Bracer, please." He held out his hand, beckoning. "Come on."

He clutched it. "No."

"I put it on you, I can take it off. Two hours isn't that hard, is it? What, you got loudmouth diarrhea? You can't control yourself? Don't give me that bullshit."

Loki sulked even worse than before but said nothing, and Clint waved for the guards to come around again, proceeding back to the cell in silence, Loki's bad mood radiating like the world's most temperamental fart.

He stood in the middle of the cell, rolling his eyes and arms folded, and glared.

"You want me to call Cap down for you? I will. You want me to see if Cap's busy?"

"Yes," through tightly-grit teeth.

Clint relayed the message that Cap'd be down in ten minutes and sailed off, warning the guards that he was leaving and sagging only when he was inside Coulson’s office.

"Oh, my God. He's a teenager. He might actually be worse than I was. Phil, save me."

But Phil wasn't there, and Clint hugged the desk instead. It was comforting. No trashy gold shit, no whining and smirking and eyerolling. Just Phil, and Clint decided to radio in and take a nap. He totally deserved it.
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

I love Steve. I love everyone.

Implied abuse, implied dysfunction, implied child abuse with an indirect focus on parental neglect.

"Oh, you got your armour back." Steve lifted an eyebrow and closed the door behind him. "Some of it. Agent Barton sounded a bit ... did you fight?"

Loki cleared his throat, hair curling damp around his face into cowlicks and the beginnings of ringlets. "Somewhat."

"It's okay, it happens," Steve assured him, and picked up his sketchbook, flipping through it. "I wondered where this went! Thanks for keeping it in such good condition. What did you think?"

"You require more practice when you draw from the rear. It was no trouble," like it was an afterthought but Loki felt obliged.

Steve paged to where he'd left off and found more sketches. "Oh, what's this? They're not at all bad."

They were -- well. Juvenile, a little. But Loki clearly put some effort into them, and it was always good to encourage budding artists.

Loki leaned over his shoulder, armour creaking the smell of leather and silk. "You requested portraits, did you not? This is my family."

Oh, he saw now. They were his children and someone that looked a bit like Loki's Jotun skin. Now that he'd had more time to spend on their details the sketch showed that he was basically drawing from something like a mental photograph, the angles slightly wrong for a face-on drawing, like he remembered looking up, not down. It was sad that Loki held onto them so tightly and somewhat reassuring since it told Steve Loki still cared about something after all, and if he could care there was something left under the rage.

"This was the last day I had with them. Its morning. Fenrir, my wolf. Taller than his father. You will not recognise Jormungandr," with some amusement. "He has changed overmuch."

Steve had to look closely, but he sat back with a surprised huff when he did. Jormungandr was curled on Angrboda's shoulders, the head hissing to Fenrir, whose massive jaw was open, tongue lolling, his tail curling to the side in a wag.

He thought the spiral around her neck was jewelry, but no, he was just very small. Angrboda was drawn tall and broad, though, no sketched-in background to give relative scale, so whether Jormungandr actually was all that small was debatable.

He'd definitely grown a lot since, though.

"I was worried about you," Steve admitted, and Loki lifted an eyebrow. "If he was very big when he
was born, it would've hurt."

"It did, but not as you think. And she," reaching over Steve's shoulder to trace the stubborn chin. She hairless and earless, curling lines sketched in over her face and to the loincloth that probably meant a lot of things Steve just didn't have the reference to understand.

Hers would've been a hard, harsh face with its broken nose and heavy brows if it wasn't for the confident angle of her shoulders, the hand curling in Fenrir's fur, the other beckoning affectionately as though calling Steve into the photograph. "She is Angrboda."

Loki wasn't very skilled but he was very good at conveying emotion, and even if he hadn't been the wistfulness of how he said her name told Steve a lot about how much Loki still loved her.

The family looked happy.

"She's beautiful," Steve said. "I mean, I don't know an awful lot about Jotun, but she looks kind in her own way."

Even if she was drawn as much, much too old for Loki. They'd mistaken Loki for an adult, but it was impossible to mistake Angrboda for a child, or even early adulthood. She came off to him as older than Tony, somewhere between that and Fury's age.

It was a bit odd to think about how young Loki must've been during all that and the more he did the more predatory Angrboda's inviting hand looked, the more commanding the crook of her fingers. They looked happy, and Loki obviously felt she'd been good to him, but contemplating how it would've worked and what Loki's standards of kindness might actually have meant in practice made Steve a bit queasy.

Loki bent further over the portrait, picking up a pencil and tucking his hair behind his ear as he corrected some minor angle. "She was kind enough. I arrived in her dwelling quite by accident and she did not slay me nor feed me to her pets."

"Pets?"

"Bilchsteim. They are unruly and aggressive, and when tamed and mated have only one master and mate. They are considered very good hunting. Your realm once had a great abundance of such sport," Loki said, still fixing the tiniest angles about Angrboda, like if he got her just right she would come out of the page.

He was smudging her in the process, but Steve didn't have the heart to stop him yet. Even if it was wrong, even if everything he was thinking was true.

"Unfortunately Asgard was unrestrained as ever and hunted all to their death. A pity. Their skins were very fine. I wear now what was preserved and your workers are adequate, but it is not the same."

"You're wearing dinosaurs?"

Loki sneered. "Is that what you call them? How uninspired."

"Well, it was ... it was a long time ago."

"Yes." Loki was doing more harm than good now, and Steve plucked the pencil out of his hand as gently as he could.
"Easy. You're -- it's okay. I know what she looks like."

That really was an impressive eyeroll. "You do not. You never will. No-one will." He made a frustrated noise. "I cannot show her as she was. I cannot show her rarity. Only the skin she wore."

"Loki, I believe you when you tell me about her, okay?" He went very still at that, and Steve pressed on, hoping he could say something right, or maybe eventually, if he kept talking. "I do try to give you the benefit of the doubt. Even when I really probably shouldn't. You loved her. She -- I mean, she looks like she loved your kids, too. I can believe that. I don't like it if I think about it too much, but you don't have to convince me."

A bitter, bitter sound, and Steve showed him his fingers so he wouldn't be startled and put them under Loki's forearm, lifting it off the sketchpad and rescuing the portrait.

"I know I look an awful lot like Thor, but I'm not him. You're a bit -- I don't know if this is out of line, but you're a bit spooked, maybe. Uh, you're reacting to something."

"You know nothing," Loki said, and jerked his wrist off Steve's hand, pacing away. His pacing was much more impressive when he had the coat, even if the lack of shoes ruined it a little. "Nothing at all. Do not presume you do."

"So I was out of line. Sorry." He noticed other pictures under the portrait. "Mind if I --?" Steve took the dismissive flick of his wrist as permission, and slowly flipped through, slowly becoming more and more concerned at one face that recurred over and over and over across the pages in half-and-quarter profiles, scribbled in the margins like he'd been doodling without realising.

He was fairly sure Chitauri had enough face not to have holes for mouths and strange stitching.

"Who's this?"

Loki didn't pause in his pacing. "Their commander."

"Well, he doesn't look very nice at all," totally inadequate, but Loki turned to him with a chuckle.

"They are not. They promised I would wish for pain should I fail as I have." Loki crinkled his face into a very nasty smile. "I have wished so before. How they plan to make me do so again is of some interest to me." Loki leaned forward, flexing his hands like he was sharing a joke. "Their strength does not lie in imagination."

Steve smiled because he got the impression he was supposed to. "That's more your style."

"Generally." Loki went back to pacing. "I have much to fear. You know this."

"Yeah, uh, that's ... it's obvious there's a lot of people that don't like you."

He laughed. "For very good reason."

Steve shrugged and looked at his clothes, then flipped back through the pictures to the first one he'd drawn of Loki and compared it with the boy in front of him. "You've filled out a bit, that's good," he noted. Loki must've been starving if getting off tube feeding and onto solid food made so much difference so soon. "Mind if I draw you again?"

Loki sniffed. "Bear in mind my armour is incomplete and it is Barton's responsibility."

"I will," he promised, and settled down. "Look, I'll write a note." It was definitely a different look,
and he sketched in the tailored green shirt and the cross-hatched leather (from dinosaurs!!!) over his arms and midsection. The coat was sleeveless, lined like the shirt, and the gold teeth outlining it matched the bracer. He didn't understand why there was only one of them but he didn't want to risk starting an argument he'd lose.

Whatever the reason it was obvious Loki felt a lot more comfortable having even some of the armour back; his walk loosened and he held himself better. Less defensive superiority, more princely confidence.

Steve thought *clothes make the man* a lot about Tony, and had to repeat *clothes make the billionaire* to himself over and over when he started complaining about suits more expensive than the tanks in Steve's day, but it struck him as even more true for Loki and Thor and the queen. They dressed the way they did because it was who they were, and who they were meant they were the ones who dressed that way.

Loki walked and talked and dressed like royalty because he was. They weren't dealing with figureheads like the British Queen, or a mysterious council keeping themselves anonymous so they couldn't be held accountable for anything that went wrong, or a President with (hopefully) some sort of senatorial governance and a whole cabinet to influence his decisions (though Steve wasn't sure about that lately).

These were people who publicly ruled planets, made public decisions, handed out public consequences like candy, and no-one could say no to them. Not other planets, not their people, not their children, no-one they trusted or didn't trust, no-one. Ever.

Steve contemplated anyone having that much power with no way to stop if something, anything, went wrong and shuddered from it.

Handing all that over to a descendant worked only if the descendant could handle themselves without reflecting too badly on the previous king because king was always, always king, as far as Steve knew from what he'd read about royals, and that was just how it worked. They didn't step down, they didn't give it up, they didn't hand it over, they died.

But Thor said Loki interrupted his coronation.

Had Odin planned to die? Where?
Jotunheim?

Had he planned to kill Thor and take back the throne? No, that was too obvious. Incapacitate him?

Steve contemplated Loki, who was bent forward, hands on his knees, and examining Steve just as intently from a foot away.

Between Frigga's ... motherliness, and Odin's conditional approval, and his children held hostage, Loki would've been a perfect puppet king, bearing all the bad publicity and reaping none of the credit and believing it was what he deserved. It was all too easy to imagine the discovery of himself as Jotun being a way to anchor him to the throne if he collapsed under the weight of power. It could have worked if everything hadn't gone wrong. If Loki hadn't found out.

"How did you discover you were Jotun?"

Loki's eyes flickered down, voice soft. "One of them touched me during battle. I was drained from preparations and didn't have the reflexes to stop it. With Angrboda I had to -- I thought I had to concentrate on my appearance nonetheless so her touch would not burn me. She commended my
spellwork." His lips twitched. "The Jotun in question was very surprised."

"I imagine he was. Ah, why are you staring like that?"

Loki lifted his eyes, smiling deep in his cheek. "Your thoughts are most transparent, your dislike obvious to the eye. All-Father is wise. Cruelty is wisdom's standardbearer. I assure you the plots you conjure in my father's stead are oversimple."

"You would've been a good king," Steve said. "Maybe not the greatest, but you would've tried."

He flinched back several steps, rising to stand very tall, hands flexing at his sides. "No," very sure. "I would not."

"If you had to, though."

"If I had to," Loki said, and bit his lips together and picked at his fingers. "You must not carry a grudge against Thor. He misspeaks in his honesty, and will have need of your heroes. Great need, if he is to defy Father at all. If his claim to Asgard were to become as strong as he hopes."

"For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth," remembering the trill, the tune. His mother had liked it. "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! And he shall reign forever and ever and ev-er," Steve sang under his breath. "King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, and he shall reign, and he shall reign forever and ev-er. It's -- it's a song. I don't remember all of the words. But it's like that with him, isn't it?"

"Forever and ever and ev-er," copying him. He had a good ear. "Yes. Unless some blonde oaf decides otherwise. I cannot imagine who could possibly be that idiotic." Loki grinned. "Can you?"

"I think I know who you mean. It's a bit risky, isn't it?"

"Oh, I should say not. He broke the All-Father's most inviolate law and received only banishment, and a way to recover himself if he but decided to consider he might not be the only sun to light all the realms of every world there was. For him, our father remembers mercy."

Loki met his eyes, seeking them like he was trying to convince Steve of something, and he sounded weirdly reassuring.

"Odin will be merciful. The only one to interfere, if he chooses to interfere at all, is our illustrious Gatekeeper. His mind I do not know; it has always been closed to me. He stands against all forces that would destroy Asgard and does so for the sake of an oath bound into blood and bone and no little of his own mysterious will. Even released from citizenship and his oaths to the throne, he is bound to Asgard and All-Father and will not slay his loved ones. I will not tell you not to fear. I tell you, carry a little less."

Steve rolled his shoulders, rubbing at the back of his neck and the knots of tension there. "Yeah, you have a point. I'm a bit of a worrier, though. I don't really like this business much. Armies from outer space are a bit beyond my ... I can't exactly pose with them for photographs."

"The commander is unreasonable. Thanos, I suspect, is not. He has reason, wherever it may be. Perhaps a photograph and signature will convince him to turn his fleet elsewhere."

"Charm isn't my strong suit. You want Tony."

Loki smiled like Steve just said something very funny. "Oh, he has purposes of his own. All you have but to do is wait."
Steve blinked. "Hold on a tick. What does that mean? What are you doing to Tony?"

That got him Loki sauntering away and singing under his breath, just where Steve would hear it and maybe the cameras, but the guards certainly couldn't. "Forever and ever and ev-er."

It was to the tune of Iron Man.
"And then Maria was like 'no, Howard, that's terrible, you'll horrify the maids, How will they pee?'. And Howard was like 'if they don't like it they'll just have to HOLD IT, won't they' and that's the story of how we still have eyeball wallpaper in the women's servants' toilets. Brucie! Sciencebro!"

Bruce let the flap fall behind him, taking a tentative step. Tony was cheerful, but normally cheerful, and Selvig didn't look like he wanted to kill him. That was ... new. "Um. Hi?"

Selvig rolled his eyes and gestured him in. "He's trying to convince me his childhood wasn't that bad. All he's citing is more evidence to the contrary."

"No, I disagree, I think eyeball wallpaper is an awesome use of funds. I left it 'cause it was the bathroom Obie bothered to know about and he used to perv a bit. I just liked the idea of him sitting around watching an empty bathroom with eyeball wallpaper staring back at him." Tony tapped his chin. "God, I was bored."

Selvig just shook his head, sighing in the put-upon way Bruce was very intimately familiar with. "Obviously. He was telling me about his mother," to Bruce.

"Wasn't she a --?" and then Bruce remembered Tony was actually in the room and shut his mouth. "Uh."

"Yeah, she was a bit 'wasn't she a'," Tony mimicked, and pointed at Bruce. "See? See? Even a gamma scientist on the run playing in war zones for fun knows my mum was doped up. Come on. Have you been living in a bunker? Tell me you saw the leaked autopsies, Bruce. You saw them, didn't you?"

"Uh ..."

"That's a yes. I bet you actually understood them too. God, that sucks, I'm -- I'm actually kind of sorry about that, they should've been released in like Esperanto or whatever. What was Howard's BAC, .10?"

"Something like that," Bruce said, and made apologetic faces. Just because Tony looked like he was completely at ease with the fact that someone went and dug up his parents' autopsies ten years after the fact didn't mean he actually was. "I'm sorry I --"

"Oh, God, don't. No apologising. Allergic, allergic, so allergic. It was all a bit ghoulishly fascinating, wasn't it? I read it too. You know, popcorn, whisky, some of my dad's opera. It was educational, I guess. You should've seen the shitstorm, daddypoo," to Selvig, and Bruce choked in the middle of setting up portal radiation estimates on his preferred laptops. "It's, it's, a thing. If he calls me son I can call him daddypoo, I think that's fair. Don't you?"
"Uh ... sure." Bruce dived into what he'd compiled of the rest of the Stark Tower data from the Tesseract. It'd been piped into the gamma frequencies he needed and now he just had to work at the comparative effects.

"Son," Selvig said, wagging a finger with a showboating grin, "I don't know what you are, but you oughta be a superstar."

Tony screeched as Selvig hid his face behind his mug, cackling. "CREEPY. CREEP ALERT. That was so wrong, don't do that, I'll hide under the table and bite your ankles next time."

Bruce chuckled and stopped paying attention. Reconstructing a mechanism from its effects wasn't Bruce's favourite method ever, but it actually worked for Tony, and that was kind of the most important thing. It was definitely a challenge, at least; there was a lot of noise in the data, still, and what was Chitauri and what was the Tesseract and what was the portal itself was trickier to do. For two of those they had independent readings that might or might not be completely useless.

Three known inputs, six active bands on the spectrum that overlapped at times under various kinds of stressors, and Bruce was having fun, actually. In part it was because it was fun and partly because Tony and Selvig actually being friendly and arguing with fewer of the 'my discipline is better than yours' wankfests was some of the best white noise he'd ever encountered. They could keep it up for hours, and in turn so could Bruce.

He came back to himself and realised he hadn't eaten, there was food somewhere nearby, he was surrounded by armed guards again -- usually they stayed outside -- and Loki was sitting across the table from him and writing in red ink on one of Selvig's proofs.

Tony and Selvig were still going, but it was more greater-understanding-through-mutual-complaining than brilliant discourse. Both were valuable, though.

"Um, hi," knowing from experience that right now Tony was so absorbed in one-upping Selvig he would just talk through fire alarms until someone, probably Bruce, dragged him out of the tent. "New look."

Loki inclined his head, bared his teeth, and tensed. "Yes."

Yeah, there were the clothes, but he was actually tipped just over the edge into definite she right now, and Bruce stifled a nervous giggle of don't-even-try-to-punch-me. Had Tony and Selvig bothered to notice? He doubted it. "Sorry, sorry, I was surprised. Is it something you always have enough magic for?"

She relaxed fractionally. "A very simple change. Eighteen key points in the body and your perceptions of gender are easily fooled."

"Well, you're," and Bruce studied him. Her. She wasn't exactly pretty, but ... "You're very striking, actually. It's a good look. So, uh, do I call you a girl right now, or not so much?"

Loki shrugged. "Why not? It shall be novel."

"Okay. Let me know if it changes." Bruce leaned to the side and over his keyboard to see a whoooooole lot of red ink all over Selvig's preliminary final calculations for the portal distortion. "New look for that too."

"It was inaccurate," Loki informed him, sounding very testy.

Bruce knew the feeling. "Burns when someone gets your field wrong, doesn't it?"
"I attempted your invitation to speak more often," Loki said abruptly.

"How'd it go?" That was surprising, actually. The idea of Loki taking Bruce seriously even once a while was unnerving.

"I did not expect -- you mortals have a rude love for speech." She looked confused. "Yet you still have not told me not to twist mine."

"We like our words," Bruce said, not quite agreeing or disagreeing. "A lot. English borrows a lot of words from a lot of other languages, so we've room to play around, and, I mean, we do it all the time. Everybody does. I'm not actually sure if you speak English, or if you're using, like, a universal translator?"

She leaned across the table with the pen and doodled on a scrap of paper that was actually a corner of Bruce's good copy of his report for Fury. "All-Speech has its dialects. They correspond, roughly, with your linguistic roots."

It was a map of Earth, but not one he'd ever seen before. An origin map from thousands of years ago, he realised, even the continents were shaped a bit differently, and tried not to think of how many linguists would kill to get their hands on it. "So you've got one for ... Latinate?"

"Not as itself. From whence it developed, yes. Much is very similar to our ear." Loki elaborated on the doodle, eyebrows drawn together, and the hair falling forward really helped sell the picture of her as a woman. Sharp eyes flickered up, pinning Bruce under the weight of what was going to be a horrible que-- "Am I pretty?"

"Uh -- yeah. Yeah, actually." That was ... pretty much one of the worst questions ever. "I mean that."

She smiled. "Of course I am, mortal," very smug. "Whether you realised the evidence before your eyes was another matter entirely."

Bruce couldn't help but snort a little. "You're ... you're a bit vain, aren't you?"

"I am a prince," Loki said. "If one does not care for their appearance, one shall be reminded of their lack. See, I have finished," and Bruce looked at the paper and choked.

Fuck the linguists. The historians would climb over them to get at this. "That's -- that's very --"

"This is not known to you?"

"Not really." Bruce peered at the doodle again. "Well, there's theories and a lot of weird stuff we can't actually explain with any of the theories, we spend a lot of time arguing, but uh, really? I can see the others, that explains a lot about prehistory, but New Mexico? Was it a Bifrost site from the start?"

"Yes."

"That explains so much," Bruce said.

Loki smiled. "We have wrought much upon Midgard, and did not care if it came to ill. It was not us to suffer. As presumably 'New Mexico' has suffered."
"You could say that." It was probably a bit unfair, a lot unfair actually, but it just made so much sense. It was beautiful. "Have you done this before? Opened portals without the Tesseract?"

That got him a giggle and a very dangerous grin. "You should consider your words carefully. You accuse me of crudity. You may not be glad of it."

"So ..." Bruce tried to untangle the syntax. He liked simple English. Give him a paper on interstellar radiation and he was happy. Give him an hour of Loki's conversation and he was desperate for a dictionary. "It's a brute force thing? To let the army through and keep it open long enough for the, uh, giant bug whales?"

"A most inelegant solution." Loki shrugged. "I walk the paths between worlds, mortal, and require no power other than my own. To cut into the ether is to lack finesse." He shrugged. "Time was of a concern."

Bruce keyed the comparative radiation laptop to screensaver; the conversation was more important right now, and he pulled the other one closer. More processing power. "But not so much right now, right? How do we get ... finesse? I mean, if we could reduce the energy burn, that'd be great."

Loki clicked her tongue and sighed. "You are hopeless," in a tone of vague despair Bruce had heard, actually, a lot, and had directed at him a lot, and he couldn't quite cover the flinching memory of what am I to do with you?

He knew Loki noticed. But Loki wasn't saying anything, even when the moment stretched out and Tony and Selvig's voices only barely filtered in past the rush in Bruce's ears, and he took a deep breath. "Uh." Okay, so, actually, he couldn't say anything properly yet, and he ducked his head, trying to buy time. "Sorry."

"I ... meant," words coming slow, and Bruce could practically hear Loki's cogs turning, figuring out what was wrong with him, "you do not ask appropriate questions. It is not a matter of power, or use, but intention."

That -- that kind of patronisation he could work with, and he drew in another breath with a grateful woosh. "Yeah, uh, Tony mentioned -- I think it was Tony -- uh, you work on probabilities?"

"Intent, of a sort. Yes."

"So instead of asking questions and hoping I get to the right place, I have to ask the really awkward uncomfortable I don't want to have to think about questions first?"

Loki twitched a smile. "Something like that. Magic is never a forgiving art."

"It must be hard," Bruce said. "Carrying that. I mean, if you can't lie to yourself, what do you do?"

The smile turned to a slash of humour. "What is it you think you have done?"

Normally he told people comparing themselves like that to just ... fuck off, the other guy wasn't a headache or cancer or dying, but this was Loki and prickly enough over the idea she even had a similar skeleton, let alone a similar situation to anyone on Earth, let alone offering the analogy.

And -- yeah. There were similarities. A few. Sometimes.

"Fucked up a lot," Bruce said, taking the time to think about it. Awkward, uncomfortable questions he didn't want to think about? Well, that right there was one of them. He guessed he could try. "Ran away. Tried to pretend I was normal, and then pretended I could act like a normal person. Ran away
some more. Uh ... tried to kill myself a lot, but, you know, indestructible. Eventually I sucked it up and dealt with it because it just wasn't -- worth it. You know, uh, hating myself, it's -- it doesn't matter. It just is. So I just ... try not to think about it. Um, it's -- I have a condition. I'm learning to accept that."

"It called me puny."

"What?" That wasn't what he'd expected. "What did?"

"Your beast," irritated clarification. "It called me a puny god and treated me like one of your wretched dolls."

Bruce blinked. "Well, I'm sorry?"

Loki rolled her eyes. "You are not one for interpretation, are you?"

"I generally prefer not to," he said, completely bemused. "I'm ... I'm kind of lost now, so I'm just going to keep on being obtuse. What are we talking about?"

A long, exasperated sigh. "I swear my children were far more intelligent than you at their birth."

Bruce could ... see that, really. They were Loki's kids. It probably ran in the family, and made him wonder about Loki's parents. " Probably. So, you know, for the ... puny mortal in the conversation, smaller words, maybe?"

"Very well." She put her hands flat on the table and leaned across it, crisp and serious and sounding exactly like his first-grade teacher explaining why Bruce couldn't steal the fifth-grade books even if he returned them when he was finished. "Power. Is. Intent."

"You're powerful because you want to be?" Bruce said blankly.

"Exactly." She smiled and sat back. "The spirit matters as much as the mind. Thor would never have Mjolnir if he did not have the will to control such an object."

"Because it's powerful." He thought about it. "It's powerful because he says it is? Or ... he knows it is, so it's true. You ... so basically, when you lie and you mean it, you, uh, you pretty much change reality."

She was beaming now. "Yes!"

"You're terrifying," he told her, and tried not to notice her preening. "But it ... does ... explain a lot. About, uh, everything. So if what people do matters less than why they do it and they can't lie about that, then it doesn't -- it doesn't matter if we have a ton of reactors, does it? We could just ... put it on a can of tuna or something and it'd still work."

"If you wish," she said with magnificent disdain. "I don't see why you would."

Bruce rubbed the skin between his eyes. "We're getting into physics that care what you think. I'm, I'm a bit, aesthetics aren't really my concern right now."

She clicked her tongue. "The look of a thing is the thing itself," she said reprovingly. "Take care."

"But ... intent, right? I don't -- I don't get this. I'm sorry, I don't understand. I'd really -- it'd be really nice if you explained a bit. Please."

"I am not nice."
"Helpful, then. You know, once in a while. Uh, I thought we had a good thing going there. Can we get back to that?"

She shook out her sleeves, regally offended. "Is it not a mortal custom to decorate your items, to distinguish from one another? Is it not easier to believe knowledge of a scroll than a sheaf?"

"The shape matters because it helps you believe it," Bruce said. "It's ... things that look more like things than things are more real than things, I read that somewhere, I liked it, I -- it's like that. Right? You look like a crazy invading king and people believe it. You look like a woman and people believe it and it all makes it real. You have to never have any liars if that ruleset is ever going to work. I don't -- I don't like it."

It left a bad taste in his mouth, actually.

"Is it not better," with a weird kind of thoughtfulness that had Bruce cleaning his glasses to avoid the way Loki had her chin on her fist, the way she watched him. She wasn't predictable but she had cues, and these said she was going to get really personal, "to have the beast appear as one?"

He opened his mouth to deny it, thought about the lurking brightness in her eyes, and wearing skins, and shapeshifting, and things that looked like things they weren't at all, and closed it to say something else. "I don't know."

"You will never succeed in your work if you don't," Loki said. "Uncertainty will be your undoing."

Bruce reached for his coffee cup. Stone cold but at least there wasn't any mould floating in it, and in his books that counted as drinkable. "Well, uh, I know for sure I don't want to be around when gods get worried." Off Loki's sour look, "I don't want the things that worry gods to be here. Better?"

"It is a start." She reached over and touched his mug. With a start Bruce felt it warm against his hand, steam fogging his glasses, and she pulled back with a smile. "But not enough for the certainty you seek."

"That's, uh, that's not really anything new," and he raised his mug to her, because if this was frustrating for Bruce it was probably a million times worse for her and she really didn't have to do that. Best to show appreciation or something. "Thanks. Thank you."

"Wait." She got up and came back with a mug for herself, then clinked it against Bruce's with the same careful frown as before. The mug was empty, but it was the thought that counted. "Uh, you should have something to drink in it. I think it's bad luck otherwise."

"Ah. Let us not tempt such wayward forces." She rose again and settled more firmly this time, and Bruce held out his mug to her. Clink. "Salud?" questioning.

He smiled back. "Salud."

"Is this a party? Why wasn't I invited? Am I too cool for your party? Huh?" Tony scowled at them. "I'm too cool, that's it, isn't it, you're just intimidated."

Loki lifted an eyebrow and looked him up and down, more and more unimpressed by the millisecond until Bruce had to stuff his fist in his mouth to stop himself from cackling. "By you?"

"Yeah, and you're a girl." Tony stared, lifting a finger, then paused. "I mean, literally, you're a girl." Loki lifted an eyebrow and sipped from her mug.
"When did this happen? Is this a new thing? Like -- are we -- is this a thing now? Do you just flip a coin in the morning?"

Bruce chortled. "Uh, it's been a few hours."

"Oh, my God, why does no-one tell me anything?" Tony flounced off, then crabwalked back. "I have a really important question."

The other eyebrow was as high as its twin. "Which is?"

Tony had his I Am A Very Serious Scientist face on, which probably meant something terrible was about to happen. "What's it like to grow boobs?"

Loki looked at him, looked at Bruce making awkward I'm so sorry he's a douche faces, then rolled her eyes. "Quite like this, as a matter of fact," and poured her drink on his head with a wicked little smile.

Tony's face was lost in a cloud of steam.

"HOLY FUCK THAT'S COLD!"

Mock-innocent: "Oh, was it?"

Tony flounced off again, resentfully clutching his eyebrows. "I hate my life."
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

Discussion of rape, sexism, different flavours of sexism, misogyny.

Cap genuinely liked her. Often it was the only reason that stopped her from delivering more lectures between her teeth than she already did.

It was barely stopping her now. She wasn't sure why, exactly, they'd commandeered a SHIELD kitchen and traded recipes for their cultural foods -- the how, she knew, the why was more obscure at the moment -- but if he sliced the onions wrong one more time she was going to deliver a very personal life lesson, and as it was she had him in a headlock.

"Should I return later?" a woman said, and Natasha catalogued sounds and movements, made a guess, and wasn't very surprised to find she was right when she turned and Loki was standing just inside the door and six studiously impassive SHIELD guards around him, face a little more bladed, his body subtly altered.

Cap ducked out from under her arm. "A cultural lesson, but it's not going very well. You're, ah," and Cap stammered. "You look different?"

Natasha waved away the guards, and one of them looked unprofessionally relieved before they saluted, closed the door behind Loki, and left in marching shuffle. "You're supposed to be making good on your research hours."

"I kicked Stark," Loki said, and glanced around the kitchen, taking a few more steps into the room. "I avoided the path of his machinery, but I could not avoid damaging the pavillion. He did not take it well."

Cap gaped, then reached for his comm. "Agent Romanova, can you --? Loki, you -- how hurt is he? InfIMARY, this is Steve Rogers..." as he closed the door behind him.

Natasha was still not surprised. "He's a bit ..."

"Rude," Loki offered, relaxing a little once it was the two of them. "Disparaging." He crossed his arms over his chest with a frown, curling his hand around one of the straps at his shoulder. "Insulting. If it were Asgard and he said such things, I would have killed him, and none would gainsay me whatever form I wore. Is he always so -- I suppose he must."

"I'm not authorised to hurt him," she said, and gestured to a chair at the counter. "Sometimes I'm very annoyed about that. Disappointing, isn't it? You'd think he'd know better."

"Would I truly expect better of mortals?"

"You'd expect better of someone acquainted with Ms Potts. We were making blini. My version, anyway. Try one." She plated it and put it in front of him.

He picked up the knife, brushing his hair behind his ears. "What is a Potts?"
"His CEO. She makes the corporate decisions that keep him financially solvent. They're in a relationship. Ms is a salutation," Natasha said, turning off the stove and taking her own plate. "It's recent. Avoids the awkward declarations of marriage status."

"Ah." He poked the blini, then tasted a corner. "The others I could understand. They are not in a position to complain, and I understand their posturing. But you are a warrior of sorts. Do you not object to ... my change?"

Natasha studied him, the way his eyes were fixed on someone else much taller than her, the attitude, the bracing of his forearms. The hands were a little finer, but not by much; he'd kept his overall size and only shifted his musculature a little to suit. She appreciated the lack of real-life Photoshop. "I don't think you're really talking to me."

"No. The Lady Sif. One of the greatest warriors of Asgard. Thor's friend and leader of the Warriors Three, his troupe."

"And a woman."

"A woman. Yes."

She took a bite and thought about how to handle Loki's implied questions. There were many, and she sorted through them, pinching off threads and connections and narrowed it down to three.

"I wasn't born this way," Natasha told her. "I was a plain child. It helped me on missions until I had to expand my skillset and look the part. That required a lot of cosmetic surgery and I spend really quite a lot of time maintaining my looks." She shrugged. "The fact that you can do it impermanently -- I'd be lying if I said I didn't envy it."

He looked startled, then frowned and leaned in to examine her as she'd expected, and Natasha held still, chewing more blini and letting him satisfy his curiosity. "You describe marked alteration and I don't see it." He peered closer. "You have lines on your bones. But they are not on the skin."

"That's the point." She shrugged it off. "Like I said, I envy that ability."

"You need not be concerned pregnancy will alter your beauty, then," half a question and a whole lot of other ones.

Natasha could take serious offense. She chose not to, because she knew where this was going and she could tell how carefully he'd chosen his phrasing. "No, I don't. I don't hold that against you either."

"The Lady Sif resents," Loki said, finishing his plate, and Natasha nodded at his inquiring look and got up to make more as he went on. There was still a good deal of batter left. "She resents a great many things. She resents me. I took -- I took her greatest beauty. The only beauty Asgard would ever acknowledge. A fine warrior is not a beautiful woman."

"Did you do it on purpose?"

"Yes. I, too, resent a great may things. I regretted it. It did not make her kin to me. It did not comfort me. She only loathed me the more, and held herself still above. She did not -- she could not be unlovely as I am and continue as the Lady Sif, shieldmaiden of Asgard. I ... regret."

Natasha glanced over her shoulder. "What did you do?"

Loki ran his hand through his hair, leaning back uncomfortably. "I bargained with the dwarves and
though my tongue was silver it was not the gold they prized, and I brought her tresses of onyx. She
was not best pleased. Aesir are a fair race. I think in time she understood it was of a piece with Lady
Sif, shieldmaiden, and came to bear it as her due. And yet."

"You're really quite beautiful," she said, because it was true to her and the truth was what Loki
needed to hear.

He folded his arms again, frowning a little. "Truly? I did not ... your rude magicians, I do not trust
their objectivity. There are other reasons to their words, and they are discomforting."

Natasha took the gift for what it was and nodded, sliding the contents of the pan onto the plate Loki
held up for her. "They're a bit different, try that. My favourite. And yeah, I do. You're a beautiful
woman."

"Thank you," and she knew what Loki meant.

"You're welcome. So what'd Stark do?"

Loki scowled. "He gave much unwanted commentary. I did not expect -- he did not stop," edging
into distress and more than a little rage. "Does he simply ignore others' wants whenever he pleases?"

Natasha knew a wrong answer at this point would raze dead any hope of Tony even being able to
talk long enough to apologise once Cap was through with lecturing him. "I had to prepare for
shadowing him once as an assistant, temporarily replacing Ms Potts, and I read a lot of files. He's
never been accused of rape. Forgetting their names, all the time -- but before, after, during? I didn't
hear about it, and SHIELD dug deep. Being good at sex is a habit. Being charming is a habit. There
are many women with regrets. Not grudges. Regrets. He just doesn't care enough about them to
change the fact."

"It seems acquiring my knowledge matters to his professional ego," testing her.

She looked him square in the face. "Cap will talk him through how much of an asshole he was, he'll
give you something very expensive and a very bad non-apology, and that should be the end of it. He
runs roughshod over everyone whether they stand up to him or not. But I was his assistant for weeks
and he never touched me."

Loki rubbed her temple, looking nowhere near reassured, and Natasha didn't like that he shouldn't be
reassured, but Stark was always a problem and lying about that helped nothing. "He will stop?"

"That way, at least. If he doesn't, he'll deal with me," Natasha promised. "I have a lot of very
disturbing anecedotes. I'm prepared to use them."

"I do not doubt you."

"Thanks." Natasha coughed to cover for Loki's flinch from her sincerity and jerked her chin at the
rapidly-emptying plate. "Like them?"

Loki quickly recovered and finished another bite. "Oh, yes. What is it?"

"Blini. Russian food. My Russian food. I was training with Cap and he wanted to know how to
make some, and these were the easiest thing I could think of. The blini part is the shell, the rest is me
adding things. I made them a lot as a child."

"Did you?"
"I make them now," Natasha countered. Whether she actually had was debatable but she'd made them since from the memories of their preparation, fake or not, and that made them real, so it didn't matter.

Loki grinned, touching his tongue to his teeth. "Yes. Now. And now, manipulated manipulator, how much have you observed of my thinking?"

"More than I'll tell you. I'll not tell you anything, actually."

"Ah." He looked pleased. "You refuse me, and do not know if you are right. Yes. It is wise not to court the risk. But do you have a counterexample? A plan, perhaps?"

"Several." Natasha wrapped her hands around her mug. "I don't agree with yours. It's risky. All of them are."

Loki mirrored her with his own cup, too pointedly done to be unconscious. "Risk is the nature of the undertaking. You are wrong, and do not know how wrong."

"It's you. Of course I don't."

He brightened. "I daresay that is the sweetest thing you've said."

"Enjoy the moment," she told him. "Right now what we want lines up. I'm more curious about what happens when it doesn't."

"That depends," Loki stealing her cold blini from her plate with a sly glance, "whether you endear yourselves to me. I may spare you all. I may spare some. I may spare none. I am but a fickle creature. Stark does not aid in your representation."

"You think he doesn't and then he does something that just barely outweighs the rest enough for me not to perform percussive maintenance on his head. It's how he works. It's no excuse for harassing you," she said.

Loki inclined his head. "If he does so again, I refuse responsibility for the consequences. He will have brought my anger to bear and I will spare no more thought for his fragile mortal flesh."

Natasha took the warning as intended with a sharp nod. "Got it."

"You are far too familiar with this conversation. Others have spoken to you of such things, have they not?"

"Harrassment isn't exactly uncommon," Natasha said, and tapped the table, rhythm organising her thoughts. "Thor said Asgard trains women to defend themselves?"

"Yes. It is necessary. If our warriors fail, they must take arms; there can be no hand without a blade should war come to Asgard. The Lady Sif does battle and that is her error. Not that she carries a sword."

"It's different here. People usually don't train to fight, and the ones that do train for fun or for their jobs, and they're mostly men. Women are usually told to put up with it in case worse happens, and a lot of the time it does happen regardless of what they do."

"They do not defend themselves from advances?"

"You have to be trained to want to use a weapon. If you're not just untrained, but trained to give in,
well." Natasha wobbled a hand. "I'm one of the best in SHIELD. I'm still given the kinds of missions that are almost never assigned to male agents. It's not equal either."

Loki was frowning. "I think I prefer Asgard's understanding of this. Stark's behaviour would never have progressed without interference from whoever was present. Banner and Selvig -- they did not intervene. They addressed him, not me. I find that strange; I was the offended party. Was the price of his punishment not my decision?"

Natasha thought about it. What it would be like not to be unusual if she trained. What it would be like if she'd been allowed to fight back from the start, not just when she was supposed to. What it would be like if her training didn't make a complete freak. Unusual, but if Lady Sif existed, someone else could.

But Natasha's methods wouldn't fit there either, and Natasha doubted she'd ever be able to make a convincing case for or against using her skills that didn't still and always rest on 'I'm a better whore than you'.

It just wasn't different enough for her to say she'd prefer one or the other.

"I don't know. I agree it's up to you, but Asgard wouldn't like me either, would it?"

"No. You are not the Lady Sif." Loki's tone implied that was very much a benefit for Natasha, and -- yes. She could see that. She could see how hard a person she'd have to be if she did everything Sif's way, and Natasha actually wasn't that far gone yet.

"I'm of the opinion we can help who we end up being after we've been fucked up by the people who were supposed to take care of us, whatever those people thought we should do. Does Asgard agree with that?"

A brief smile. "No, but I like it."

"I don't think I've done too badly, everything considered." Natasha shrugged. "I've the Widow's face and I'm still a person underneath. I think that means I've done okay."

"I have not," Loki said pensively. "I know not of personhood. I know not my body, my mind, my spirit. Who I am is lost to me."

"So make it up," Natasha said. "I mean, if I did it, how hard can it be for a god?"

Loki gave a rich laugh. "That was entirely too obvious a ploy. Yet you are sincere. I will consider it, but I promise nothing."

She didn't care if he promised or not. The Widow was good at ferreting out intentions, and Loki was already thinking it over. If he didn't grow up to be Natasha it'd be a hell of a start.
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

Discussion of homophobia, transphobia, douchery around gender roles/fluidity/etc, references to past cissexism.

Also Jarvis is snarky and I love them.

"What the hell were you thinking? I just -- I -- Tony."

"I know," he said from the bed, and he'd have flipped him off if his arms didn't hurt so much. Really, he knew. He knew he'd fucked up, it'd be great if Steve would stop it now, thanks. "I know, okay? I know. Jesus. I wasn't thinking, okay?"

Steve righted the chair he'd kicked over and sat down in it, rubbing his face. "You're unbelievable."

"Yeah, I know," edged with a bit of self-deprecation. More than a bit. He'd acted like Obie, today, and acting like Obie was definitely not something to be proud of. God, Obie had been a perverted fuck.

"Just -- why?"

"Bad role models? I go too fucking far sometimes? I didn't expect she'd give me that much rope to hang myself? I don't know, okay? I mean, I -- god, what do you expect me to do when the kid switches like it's nothing? He grew tits, for fucks' sake, am I supposed not to say anything? Seriously?"

"I expect you to behave like an adult," Steve said, clearly unhappy with everything and especially Tony right now. "I know it's a bit of a shock, but you can be mature, Tony, I've seen you do it. Why can't you --"

"Well, you're handling it just fine and dandy for a 40s dude, aren't you? Aren't you supposed to be homophobic and shit?"

Whoa.

Tony hadn't seen that particular glare before. "Oops?"

"Tony," very slow and even and completely not buying it, and God, it was bad wasn't it, this was going to be bad, could he just go already, "You have no idea what it was like. Why do you think my unit had to rescue themselves?"

He held up a finger. "Well, see, you're Captain America --"

"I'm talking."

Tony shut his mouth.

"107th were the trash. We were the people no-one wanted. We were desegregated. We had inverts
and queers and freaks that slipped into recruitment because they wanted to do some good. A lot of people who just... and they were some of the bravest, kindest -- do you have any -- no, you wouldn't know. You wouldn't." He put his face in his hands. "God, Tony. You don't even know."

He stared at his hands, picking at the reactor, and had no idea what to say, completely inadequate in the face of Steve sounding like that. "Yeah. I don't know. I didn't know, God, Steve, how'd you keep them alive?"

Steve shook his head, still hiding behind his hands. "We looked out for each other. That's all. I look out for you, too. I just wish you wouldn't be like -- well. It hasn't changed much."

"You were gonna say I was acting like Howard."

"Yeah. Yes. I was."

Tony tried to get comfortable on the lumpy mattress, unable to really look at him, because seriously, oh God, fucking up this bad was humiliating and he kind of really actually had a lot riding on not making Steve hate him again. "Normally I'd be really angry at you, but, I mean, circumstances. Was he mean to your friends? I mean, did he say that shit?"

"Yeah."

"I'm a -- I'm a bad person. You know I'm a bad person. You know it's genetic, right? I'm a bad person."

Steve lowered his hands, slouching like he was very, very tired. "Sometimes."

He barked a laugh. "Shit, Steve, that's harsh. You're harsh. Good thing I completely deserve it, huh? Yeah. Yeah, I am. God. I just wasn't thinking. Well, okay, you know what, I'm just not going to -- you know, if this is acting like my dad, fuck that. Fuck that. Fuck him. Fuck it. I won't."

And acting like Obie could go fuck itself, too.

"Okay? I won't. I'm not interested in being that kind of douchebag. I just wasn't thinking. I mean, boobs. You don't just pop tits, you know? It's -- it's, come on, I was surprised, what do you expect me to do? I mean, it's -- it's not a thing! it's not a thing that happens! I don't know these people -- I -- fuck. I'm digging, aren't I, I'm totally digging, I'm being a bastard."

Steve sighed. "Yes, Tony. You might want to stop."

"Yeah, good idea." He shut his mouth again and stared at the ceiling, fingers twitching. God, sandburn hurt, Loki had thrown him about sixty, fifty meters through the wall and he'd skidded twenty of those and lost a bunch of skin in the process. Definitely going to feel it once the drugs wore off.

Tony might not've deserved the last thirty meters, that was just uncalled for, but he totally deserved at least twenty. That was fair.

"How'd you know? I mean, did they, like, come up and make out with you, or was it like, a roundtable thing, I'm queer, you're queer, everybody's a bit bent round these sexy, sexy star-spangled pants -- I mean parts --"

Steve coughed something that might've been a laugh and shook his head. "Nothing like that. I just..." He shrugged. "Sometimes I found out. Sometimes they told me. Sometimes I just suspected. I didn't -- I didn't ask. You just don't ask about that sort of thing."
"Well, I do. I'm oblivious, okay? I'm socially maladjusted. I'm not the kind of person anybody tells this stuff," Tony said. "Pepper's way better at it. Or Rhodey. Or anybody would be better. I'm just ... I'm not." He grimaced. "I'm not -- I don't -- the whole flipping on a dime thing? Really bugs me. Really really bugs me. It's not the same, but it -- kind of is? I just wasn't thinking." He rubbed under his eyes. "So ... scale of angry, how pissed off is she?"

"I left her with Romanova, so she's probably calmed down, but I don't think angry is the problem. I think you might've scared her, Tony."

"Seriously? I can't even DO anything to her, she'd squash me like a bug."

Steve sighed and gave him a very pointed look. "We know that. Does she know that?"

"Fuck," he said. "I have the -- oh, fuck, I can see -- the magic gloves, and the bracelets --" He kicked the bed with his heels and felt completely justified in screaming even if it bothered the nurses. "Fuck, fuck, FUCK. I'm not that kind of person, Jesus fucking Christ! I'm not!"

Steve just sighed at him again.

"God. Okay, so, I fucked up, but how do I fix it? Throw me a line here. How do I fix this shit?"

"I don't know if you can. Apologising would be a good start, though."

"I know that. I just mean in general." Tony flailed vaguely, hampered by the bandages. He felt like a mummy. "Like -- what? What? What do I do? Is this a regular thing? Am I just being fucked with or is this a legit thing? I honestly thought it wasn't legit, okay, I mean, that's weird. That's an asshole thing to say, isn't it?"

"Tony ...

"I'm a douchebag, let's face it." He rubbed under his eyes again and raked his fingernails down his cheeks for good measure, trying to get his head together, Jesus, he was an asshole. "Okay, you know what, I don't -- I don't even get it, but if she wants to prance around with tits and be a she, thanks for the lesson, Steve, fine, okay. Okay, then. I just want my research hours. And coffee. Can I have coffee?"

"I'll ask the nurse. Don't get up."

Tony pointed at his wrapped feet. "Hello, not going anywhere."

As bad as Steve's disappointed face was, being alone was actually worse right now.

SHIELD wasn't supposed to surprise him any more. Loki basically took that, went 'fuck surprises!' and whacked him over the head with a pinata like he was the stick to a whole bunch of candy and expected him to keep up with a teenage god, occassional girl, even more occassional semi-friendly alien, constant pain in his ass.

Yeah, fuck that shit, he was marching to his own drummer.

His own douchebag Howard-esque, Obie-esque drummer. Great drummer there, really, full of great advice like 'vodka in the morning, gin in the afternoon, whisky at night' and and peeping on the maids and shit, and that was depressing already. Tony just wasn't raised right, he knew that, but Steve made it horribly obvious.

Like 'Captain Rose-Coloured Glasses From the Incredibly Depressing Depressed 40s is More
Socially Adept than You' obvious. That wouldn't fit in a tweet. Maybe it would. Fuck twitter anyway.

Tony snuck his phone out from under his bed and called up Jarvis. Technically he wasn't supposed to even have it, and Steve hated it when he worked instead of rested, but it wasn't like he was working anyway. "Okay, dude, you know more than me, sooo ... what's up with Loki?"

That got him a Wikipedia page.

He wanted information from Jarvis and Jarvis gave him Wikipedia like he was doing a project in grade school, what the fuck. Getting schooled by Jarvis totally chapped his ass. "Damnit, Jarvis."

A lot of it was stuff he was vaguely aware of already, but it felt unreal and there were the little blue links anyway and he was reading about alexandrite for no reason when Steve came back in.

He paused, stared, sighed, and just gave him the coffee without any comment. It was a very judgemental silence. Like Jarvis levels of judgemental silence.

"I was looking it up," Tony said defensively. "It's not that complicated, right?"

"That was my point, actually." Steve took a seat with his own mug, rubbing the stubble starting to dot his jaw. Tony really missed happy-Steve. He'd settle for neutral-Steve, even. Disappointed-Steve just put a rock in his chest.

"This whole cold-shoulder thing you've got going is seriously not doing it for me, just so you know," thumbing back about thirty pages to the original and scrolling past the intro. "God, genetics are fucking weird. I don't get how Bruce ever kept track of this shit. You know, I -- I don't like Loki, right? That doesn't mean I want to do ... whatever I did. I don't -- seriously, your face."

Steve just listened like a lump and Tony felt completely compelled to just talk over that weird judgemental blank.

"Oh, God, what do you even want me to say? What do you want me to do? Do you think people actually tell me when I've fucked up, like, ever? They don't. Seriously, they don't, this is a new experience for me, I'm trying, okay. I'm even feeling shame, I'm pretty sure it's shame, it's a distant memory. Shame, Steve. It's fucking weird! Why am I sitting here feeling guilty when she should be apologising to me right now for ripping my fucking skin off? I need this pretty face. I need it." He blinked. "Oh, hey."

Tony brightened. Idea! Ideas were great. Ideas were way better than self-flagellation, he'd done way too much of that this decade.

"Jarvis, Jarvis!" He clicked his fingers at Steve to make sure he had his attention, maybe he was zoning out or something, that was unacceptable. "D'you think she'd like a dress version of the armour she's got? Would that help? Like, doesn't that show acceptance or something? I can totally do that. Real gold and everything. It'd be like ... bow-chicka-bow-wow, right? Sparkly shit? Teenage girls love that stuff, don't they?"

Steve put his face in his hands again and he couldn't tell if he was laughing or crying, he was kind of concerned now actually. "What? What? What's wrong now?"

"Oh, Tony."

"What does that even mean? I'm asking a perfectly legitimate question here! I've never been a teenage girl, actually maybe you could tell me, you were close enough right --."
"You should probably ask her," Steve said, and maybe he was actually laughing because he looked more like himself now. That was good. "Make a schematic?"

"Good idea, good idea, mockups, I'll make a few, Jarvis, follow my finger, come on. Also wow, I'm a douchebag, I totally didn't mean to make that crack. I ... god, I'm going to train myself like a dog or something, I'll be going to dog training. Douchebag woof woof, six sessions and presto, less douche, more ... bag. Or is it more douche and less bag? How does that even work anyway? This is a totally legit concern, Steve, why are you laughing?"

"You need to apologise to her," Steve said, once he'd settled down, still rosy-cheeked like a good old apple pie Iowa farmboy. "Properly. Sincerely. Offer the dress if you want, but make sure you apologise."

Tony made a face. "Dresses. Dresses, plural, she needs a wardrobe, every girl needs one, it'll be diamonds. But I'm not kneeling. I don't -- I don't do that stuff, I'm not into that. But I can totally -- I -- I'll come up with something, I'll make Jarvis write a speech. It counts, right?"

Steve shook his head. "You have to say it. Just -- improvise."

"You're telling me to improvise? I'm sorry, that's the worst advice ever, I can't -- I'll just be like 'o exotic wannabe overlord girl I'm sorry I was mean to you, have clothes or something', that's awful, that's not going to work -- stop laughing, seriously, it's unattractive, your tongue's gonna fall out --""

"You'll be fine, Tony."

He would totally deny the sound he made when he flailed was a whimper. "What? Why would you say that? I'm horrible. I'm a horrible person and I'm going to fuck it up, this is not fine! I am not fine! Fine is not on the fucking menu! Why would you even say that?"

"You're already calling her a her, Tony."

"Oh. I guess. It makes sense? I'm an engineer, we call things things, it's not like I go 'hand me a wrench, I've decided this screwdriver-shaped thing is a wrench today', like, ever, it's just wrong. A screwdriver is a screwdriver. Yeah, if I just think about it like that I'm not gonna flirt with her. I don't -- I don't do screwdrivers, I'm not hot for Dummy or anything. Or Jarvis, sorry Jarvis, I just don't like you like that, I'm sorry, we can be friends or something."

Steve held up a hand and Tony rambled himself to a stop. "Listen. You'll be fine. Okay? You'll be fine. Just ... try not to be mean. Okay?"

"Don't worry, I'll pretend she's a screwdriver or whatever if I have to." Tony pulled the best face he could while being a Tony-mummy. "Orrr I could just remember she's fourteen like I'm supposed to. This is going to be the most awkward thing in the history of ever."

"But are you ready? Do you know why you were an asshole?"

"Uh ... yeah. I know. I -- yeah. Yeah, okay, let's do it. You're watching, aren't you? You're totally going to sit there and watch me humiliate myself. Fine, go get her or something before I chicken out. God. You have my permission to smack me in the face if I douche out. Limited time only."

Steve just smiled and got up. "I'm here to support you in any way I can, Tony."

"I knew you were secretly evil."
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

I still love everyone.

Including all of you! Wow, your comments and kudos have been amazing and inspiring. Thank you so much!

He'd never been so glad to be posted on a mission in his life. It was a short infiltration in Latveria and a couple of assassinations, but for a few hours he could just pretend he was Badass Agent Clint Barton, not glorified babysitter to a bunch of people who really shouldn't need a fucking adult.

So of course Fury got him up on the comm as soon as he landed and told him to report to the infirmary for babysitting.

Clint didn't bother asking him why. He'd find out. Someone would tell him no matter how much he didn't want to know and he'd have to clean it up because somehow he was the designated driver to a madhouse.

He grabbed Nat's private line. "What am I walking into?"

She sounded too cheerful to be real. "Let's see. Stark crept on Loki. She kicked him through the tent and I made us blini. Stark decided to apologise with Cap supervising, but he couldn't stop laughing, so they kicked him out. They're currently debating dress fabrics. Loki's a she at the moment, Banner suggested she might be bigender and she took to it. Oh, and welcome back."

She? She? Both? So they got a temperamental teenage boy and a temperamental teenage girl? At random?

There was only really one thing he could say to all that. "Fuck you, Nat."

He plodded to the infirmary, noticing the increasing prevalence of exasperated SHIELD nurses, and didn't even have to bother asking which room was Stark's -- the yelling told him well enough.

"I," a girl was hissing, "am not wearing turquoise."

Loki. Yup. Definitely.

Clint got done with his turn being poked and injected and slid the door back, blinking at the scene. Mummy bandages were a new look for Stark. Loki kneeling on the bed and jabbing at the rotating 3D model between them and cursing Stark out in language Clint was pretty sure she'd picked up from Elizabethan-era dockworkers was also a new look.

"I don't want to know," he announced, and took his bow off his shoulder, grateful for the couch. The bed was kinda crowded and Clint wasn't up to bending his knees right now. "Tell me anyway."

"I am a woman," Loki announced, like she was spoilers for a fight. "Currently."

"Okay, that's cool," Clint said, because this was actually the least weird thing about his life right
Loki squinted. "Your response is not unfavourable."

He blinked grit out of his eyes and sagged against the couch back, slowly unlacing his boots. "That's 'cause I don't actually care."

One boot off, one more to go.

She shrugged and turned back to the model, hissing. "Imbecile! Pox-ridden pissant son of a syphilitic weal, I said no *turquoise*!"

"It's not like I design stuff for a living or something," Stark said, flopping against the pillows stacked against his back. "Oh, wait, it's like twenty percent of my job. And, you know, you're not actually wrong about Howard, but ow, move, you're sliding again, that's raw skin, seriously, ow."

Loki huffed and repositioned herself. "If you would not move --"

"I'm sorry I'm in a delicate condition because you threw me through a wall. Are you trying to mark off a list? Window, wall, do you just have an obsession with nouns that start with w --"

"Wastrel," Loki said, creepily fond.

"Yeah, like -- like that -- hey, goddamnit, I know what that word means, you know. Shut it, Frosty."

She smirked. "You have absolutely no taste."

"And you're just tacky. You want too much goddamn gold. You do not need more gold on this shit. Mix and match baby, mix and match. Learn it."

"You don't actually need me here, do you?" Clint said.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but do you, like, swearing apprenticeships? I could go for that, just saying."

"He apologised," Loki said serenely. "I am reserving judgement."

"I grovelled," Stark complained. "I begged. It was humiliating. I was -- there was toelicking, I don't want to talk about it. You froze my tongue on purpose."

"Whyever would I tire of it?"

"I'm a douchebag?"

"That too." She hummed. "Oh, I like this."
Stark went on. "Seriously, what's wrong with you? Too much goddamn gold. Put some green here and it'd be fine."

"Ignorant peon. You have the brain of a gnat. That ruins the balance."

"Gnat-brain, I like that. And no it doesn't."

"Does too."

"It does not."

"It doesn't," Clint mumbled, sagging into the cushions.

"Your eyes are not open, Agent Barton, you have no place in this discussion."

"Argument, we're arguing, there's yelling, maybe even some shouting, that word's way too civilised - -"

"Discussion. If you think this is an argument you are sorely lacking in challenge."

"Oh, well then, Miss Argument. This has to be final. This is the final, right? If we have to do this again I'll crash a plane or something, it'll make me feel better."

"I demanded gold stitching and yet I do not see it. Correct your oversight immediately."

"Oh, you know what, that's it with the gold --"

Clint slid into sleep and woke some undefined time later, but probably three hours by the feel of it, to the smell of coffee under his nose and the couch dipping under someone very light.

"Thanks," he muttered, cracking an eye and fumbling a hand from under a blanket that hadn't been there before to take the mug. Stark was asleep in his bed, snoring with his mouth open, and Loki was sat with her back against Clint's knees, hands folded in her lap and focused on him.

Clint automatically tasted for poison and finding none, just the excellent nurses' coffee (how Loki buttered up the nurses to let them share their stash he had no idea, he usually had to steal it with jerry-rigged tricks from heist movies), downed a quarter of the enormous mug.

"What do you want?" he croaked, and cleared his throat. "I'm not not-flattered you think I'm fascinating, but is there a point to you staring at me?"

"I am sorry," and that was the last thing he'd ever expected to hear, and the mug would've slipped if Loki hadn't reached out with reflexes almost faster than Clint could track and steadied it. "I regret that I forced you to turn on your friends."

"You know that's not actually going to help anything, right? Like, that's -- they're still dead, and you still did a shitty thing. You know that, right?"

"Yes."

"I'm, I ... well, fuck."

Fine, so he was going to deal with this right now, apparently, and he shifted his shoulders against the arm and sat up a bit more. Feelings talk while he was lying down was just uncomfortable. Being in such close quarters was uncomfortable enough already.
"Look, I'm really, really good friends with expediency, all right? It's a lot less insulting to me if you're like 'I regret I had to do this for a goal I don't regret', and way more insulting if you're like 'I want you to think I regret the whole thing and enslaving you was meaningless anyway'." He cradled the coffee. "Pick one."

"The first," after a moment. "My methods were hasty and ill-executed."

"But you don't regret actually doing it."

"No."

"Then don't lie to make me feel better or grateful to you or whatever. You ordered me to kill people I trusted. You did that for a reason. That I can deal with; it's not the first time I've had to. You up to hearing what I can't deal with?" Clint swallowed coffee. "I'm not feeling all that nice."

Loki searched his face, then nodded, hands woven together in her lap, knuckles edging white. "Tell me."

"I can't deal with you acting like being sorry how you did it can make what happened mean less. They're dead, and they died because of you." He pointed between them with his free hand. "And you used me to do it. That's a fact. It means something. I hate you. That's another fact, and you've put it here in my head," tapping his temple. "It means something too."

"What do you suggest, then?"

God, she was young. "Live with it. Sorry," and it was actually genuine, he really meant it. "It's shit, but there it is. Did you accept Stark's grovelling because he was grovelling, or because he meant it?"

Loki twitched a sly little smile, quickly smoothed away. "The grovelling was because I could. He was aware and regretful. That is unusual in my experience. As you did now. Do you all behave so?"

"Hell no. You gotta take us as individuals. The thing you're missing here is that I hate you. I hate you a whole lot. But, but, I'm responsible for making sure you're treated okay by our standards, and that overrides whatever I personally want. I don't like it; I really want to shoot you. But shit happens, you don't always get what you want, blah blah. Stuff like that. I'm living with it."

"That must be difficult," Loki ventured.

"Oh, yeah. I'm good at what I do, though. This is part of it. Otherwise everyone would drive themselves crazy in a year. Some do anyway, but."

"How?" She dropped her eyes and picked at her fingernails, hunching a little. "How do you do that?"

Clint swallowed more coffee. He was glad of the good stuff for this conversation; he'd never been the feelings expert, he mostly left that to Nat, and Loki was touchy as a hot potato. Right now she came across more inclined to think about what he said before she reacted rather than act first and process later, and whether that meant she was a) starting to settle in a bit or b) swinging the other way into hypervigilance, was a debate Clint wasn't qualified for.

Probably both, especially after her mum coming by. That wouldn't have helped.

"Practice, mostly. I guess you're used to being able to change stuff around, huh?"

"It is easy," Loki said. "Belief is easily forged; memories moreso."
Clint shook his head. "Don't do it to Nat. That's my only real ask right now. Don't. You know, please. It's a bad idea."

"I would not," and Loki looked startled at herself, then went on. "She ... I would not. Do not fear that."

"Okay, cool." He drained the mug and stared into the bottom. "Any chance there's more coffee?"

She got up, taking it delicately by the bottom. Definitely not a big fan of touch, even accidental. Clint figured it made sense, and when she came back with it full and a mug -- of beer? -- smelled like beer -- for herself, he figured he could be careful too.

"What's that you've got?"

"Alcohol," she said smartly, confirming his suspicion that either the nurses were really lax this shift, she'd snuck it between shift change, or she'd charmed them somehow. "Your beverages are very weak."

"Beer girl?"

She drank a little, licking foam off her lips and holding the glass in both hands. It was sort of sweet, in a could-break-his-spine-with-her-little-finger way. "I suppose. Mead is not to my liking. Stark still owes me a drink, but he has forgotten."

Clint chuckled as quietly as he could. "Nah, he remembers, he's just dodging you. Doesn't want to be responsible for getting you drunk."

Loki furrowed her eyebrows. "Whyever is that a concern?"

"We have an age of consent thing going on. Uh, in this country the age you can start drinking is twenty-one. Most stuff is when you're eighteen, but for alcohol it's twenty-one. On the Helicarrier it'd be eighteen, but we're not on the Helicarrier. A lot of people don't pay much attention and start at eighteen anyway, but it's the legal limit. Fury's kind of read Stark the riot act about you. Means he's told him not to corrupt you."

"How remarkably foolish," Loki said, and shifted against his knees, curling her feet under her, and Clint made a bit more room. "How will one carry their brew if they do not learn?"

"No bloody clue," Clint said, inhaling fresh coffee. First cup was to wake him up; second cup was to be savoured.

"Hmm."

He looked up from guzzling to see Loki tilting her head at him. "What?"

"Do you not fear I will corrupt him?"

"If you do, you do. If you don't, I'm good with that." Clint really didn't have an opinion. Stark was enough of a neurotic, narcissistic mess already that Loki wading into it wouldn't do much, especially with Nat balancing out whatever damage she did manage to inflict.

She leaned closer, eyes very greenly intent, beer set on her thigh. There was a speck of brown in her left iris and her breath smelled like yeast and blood. "And you? Do you not fear I will corrupt you once again?"
Clint stared back at her, unimpressed, and sucked his cheek, his hand on a tranq arrow, head butting against his knuckles. He was ready. "You've already had me. I'm boring now."

Loki withdrew, giggling, atmosphere lightening again, and somehow everything seemed so much brighter once she shook back her hair and sipped again. "Yes. Yes, you are."

"So why are you here? If I didn't know better I'd say you were hanging out with me. Or are you hanging out for something? I won't spill info."

She shrugged, swallowing down the last and giving a healthy burp. "I am simply that bored."

Clint slowly released the arrow, let it slip back into the quiver, and didn't miss Loki's amusement. "Hey, if I was desperate."

"Very."

"Yeah, well, you do that to people." He braced his shoulders and felt his spine pop. "You ever feel like the world's a joke and you're the punchline?"

"Always," soft and light and definitely a confession. She shrugged it off, though, and he didn't feel like pursuing it. Heere Be Dragones, or something. "You feel the same?"

Clint stared at the ceiling. "Yeah. So ... you made up your mind? You gonna kill me with that thing?"

Loki shifted her hand to show the little golden throwing knife, fingers held so it was hidden from the SHIELD cameras. It was all blades and nastily sharp points. If she wedged that deep in his gut the way her trajectory said she wanted to the nurses would have a hell of a time digging it out. He'd probably bleed out first. "I haven't decided. You are necessary to this ... what do you call this? Operation?"

"Agency."

"Agency," she murmured, and went on. "Killing you is much like the murder of your beloved Agent Coulson. You don't function very well without him, do you?"

Clint met her eyes and let his face say a hell of a lot about how much Phil meant to him. "Never did."

She smiled wickedly. "I tell you this, then, as reward for your mortal bravery. He will never say and you will never question for fear of the answer, but as you were to the son of Coul, so you are to Nicholas Fury. A beloved nephew."

"Hell of an honour." Something in his chest twisted. "Is this a death gift or something? Is this the part where you kill me? Because seriously, the suspense is pretty uncool."

"Quite the opposite. You are as nothing to me, Barton." Loki got up, smoothing her coat, and slanted a diabolical smile his way. "Yet again it was my hand which spared you. And you shall know as long as you live you do so by my sufferance. Mine, and no other."

Bitch.

"You can stop pretending now," Clint said when the door shut.

Stark inhaled in a noisy whoosh and sat up, gesturing to the door and a little wild around the eyes. "Okay, so -- creepy, or really fucking creepy?"
"You're just jealous you're not important enough to threaten," Clint said.

"Dude, wall."

"Fair enough." He finished the coffee. "You might want to step up the portal thing so Thor can get back. Chitauri guy is gonna turn up soon."

"What? How?" Stark groaned. "How do you know that? Is this some creepy spy thing?"

"She just told me." In big, red, flashing letters.
Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

Dysfunction, manipulation, dun-dun-dun! Kind of. I love Fury.

Steve didn't understand Agent Barton. He was pleasant enough, but most of the time he was eerie in a way Steve couldn't explain. It was something about the way everything slid off him. He handled it, and handled it, and handled it, and never cracked.

So being called to be briefed by Director Fury and an openly concerned Agent Barton was very, very strange.

The worst part was what they said.

"She has nightmares," Steve said inadequately, rubbing his chin. "I don't really know what they're about, but I'm pretty sure she's being tortured. Are you sure Thor will help? If anything, he might make her worse."

Fury had his arms folded. "That's not the point. We can't guarantee the Initiative can keep Loki here if the Chitauri decide to snatch her. Thor can."

"We could set up round-the-clock watches. We do something fairly close already, it wouldn't be difficult to make up shifts."

Agent Barton was paging through a tablet, but he found what he was looking for and spun it across the table to Steve. "I dunno what she was warning me about exactly, but take a look."

It took a while to figure out what he was looking at, and being silently watched by the two of them was a bit intimidating, but when he did -- "The magic shield doesn't stop the Chitauri?"

"Nope. Not even close. Banner tried to set it up differently, but it's going to take time we don't have. You've noticed the nightmares are getting worse? She's getting clingier? A lot clingier?"

Steve didn't like to think about it. "Yeah. So the magic shield can't stop whatever the Chitauri do, but my shield can?"

"That's the short of it, Captain. You up to babysitting 24/7?"

"I ... well, what is it you want me to do, sir?"

Barton cut in. "If we can't stop her getting snatched, at least if you delay them long enough we can get a reading and figure out where to point the portal. Selvig's got a theory the Tesseract can only go where it's already been. If Asgard hasn't known about the Chitauri, they don't know where they are, and stalling the commander is our only shot to find out. Sir, she's got Stark making her new armour. With very specific requirements."

"Find out the details. Captain, I want everyone else on shifts, and I want you near Loki at all times."

"For how long? She'll go stir-crazy, sir."
"Nat thinks maybe two days, tops."

Steve blinked, gut roiling. "Already? How do you know?"

Fury took the tablet and shoved it back. "Loki left that in Stark's tent. We found it in cleanup."

The writing was clean and clear cursive of the kind Steve remembered from his grandparents' letters, half-covered by an aimless spiral of ink darkening to thick black. *Leave them. The punishment is mine.*

"We think it's communicating with her," Fury said.

"And for whatever reason, she's bargaining with it for us to stay alive." Barton leaned over the table and pointed to the strange, disjointed figure beneath it. "We think this might be a cross-section of the Horsehead Nebula. Here's a picture."

"You can take pictures of space?"

"Yeah. They're real pretty, Cap -- I'll show you sometime. See the head in it? It matches to right about here, where the eye would be on a real horse. But it doesn't give coordinates, just a possible location."

Steve's comm beeped. So did Barton's. Barton slowly thumbed it in a gesture Steve recognised as putting it on wideband.

"Yeah, Nat?"

"The queen's back."

"Fuck," Agent Barton said, and leapt into the ceiling.

Steve was distantly aware of Fury shouting orders as he ran to the cell, Barton alerting them to his position.

He didn't expect to see Loki in her arms, and he didn't expect to see her hand stroking his hair slowly.

Steve slowed down, panting, and nodded to her. "Ma'am."

She gave him a warm smile. "Hello, Steven. I was visiting my son when he became quite upset. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes," clogged and muffled. "Go away, Captain."

Steve hesitated. "Are you sure?"

Frigga's smile thinned, and thinned, and thinned, and Steve took a deep breath and went inside. "Pleasure to see you again, ma'am."

"Likewise, Steven. How do you fare now? You look very tired. You should rest."

"I'm fine, ma'am, thank you for asking. Can I ask the purpose of your visit?"

"I wished to see my son." She patted his hair again. "I've missed him so. I'm sure he's happy to see me too. Aren't you, child?"
Loki nodded against her, but he wasn't clinging to her so much as he was holding her away, and Steve narrowed his eyes. Something was still wrong.

"Oh, Steven. I really do disapprove of how you have cared for my son. You must know he's quite delicate. He would be better off home."

Loki made a soft sound against her. "Mother, please."

"Hush, child. Hush. This has gone on far too long, you realise," sorrowful and sad and earnestly pleading understanding. "I do appreciate that you have tried, but --" She sighed, leaning her cheek against Loki's hair. "I do apologise, Steven, but it's simply not enough. Exposing him to that monstrous creature does nothing for his state of mind. Can't you tell how badly witnessing it has affected him? Why would you do such a thing?"

Loki stirred weakly, and -- Steve blinked. She was trapping him. "Mother. I have not -- I swear to you, I have not --"

"Shhh," gentle. "It is all right. You need not lie, my child. It will be all right. We will take you in hand."

He drew on every little bit of diplomacy he'd ever learned to stop himself from charging. "Ma'am, could you please release him a minute? I'm not sure he can breathe very well."

A lie, of course, but to challenge it would be to open herself to challenge in return. Steve hoped it was enough to get Loki a little room.

She smiled. "Of course," and shifted her hands to Loki's elbows on the pretext of steadying him, bussing his cheek with an affectionate kiss. "Is that better, child?"

"Yes." Loki was downcast, avoiding Steve's eyes. "Thank you, Mother."

"Now, Steven, I would very much appreciate an explanation."

"I speak for SHIELD," Fury said behind him from the gangway, and Steve moved aside to give line of sight. "I believe I asked you to do us the courtesy of some warning."

"I had very little time, Nicholas." She turned to Loki again, palming his cheek. "I wanted to see my son. I have spoken to your father, child. We wish you home. Safe and sound."

Steve heard Loki's throat click. "I am not worthy, Mother."

"Of course not," she said sternly. "You have done so much that is unfit for a king, unfit for Odinsson. You are yet loved. Do you not believe me? Hm? Why do you turn your gaze from the truth?" She put her finger to his chin and looked up to smile. "I love you dearly. That is why I must take you home."

"Father will be angry," Loki said, almost toneless.

Frigga sighed very quietly. "Oh, child. I told you. He will find his softer heart once he lays eyes on you. Alive. With us."

"He's not going anywhere," Fury said. "Not with you, not with anybody. Please step away from the prisoner."

"How can you treat my son like this? He is a prince! A Prince of Asgard! This squalor is beneath
Loki shivered. "Mother, truly? Am I still -- I had thought --"

"You are our son," she said. "Of course you may have your title once you are punished. It will only take a little time. You must be patient."

Steve cleared his throat. "What's the punishment you're planning, ma'am?"

"Oh, Steven. Nothing too terrible, of course." She was fussing with Loki's hair now, pushing it behind his ears and off his forehead, and he looked pale and sick, swaying into her touch with his eyes half-lidded. "He has wronged many, but he is my son. I would not see him come to harm."

"Ma'am, I'm not so sure I believe you. I'd like a definition of 'not too terrible', if you'd oblige. We're a bit antsy around here lately."

"Of course, Nicholas," she said. "Of course. Some isolation, perhaps, to reflect on his wrongs? Oh, and I think he will not have supper. Does that seem fair to you?"

A muscle in Fury's jaw was twitching. "And that means?"

Her look was pitying. "I have indulged you, Nicholas. Ask no further, lest you exhaust my tolerance. See, my child is tire."

Loki was paler and sicker now, hands clutching at the sleeves of her dress. "You are not my mother. I -- I do not wish to, mother. I am not finished."

"She's doing something," Barton said from Steve's comm. "I don't know what, but something."

"Oh, child, how long have you been this way?" Frigga touched his forehead, all motherly concern. "You must come home at once."

"Think she did last time too. Didn't he look better after?"

"No," he whispered back, closing his eyes, grimacing like he was in pain. "No, mother. I cannot. I am pursued, I will -- you will be in danger."

"Yeah," Romanova said. "Just reviewed the tapes from last time. It's some kind of magic."

"She's making him sick?" Tony said. "That's ... sick."

"He could be pretending."

"But what for? Nat, I get what you mean, but I'm not seeing it. She's definitely doing something. Unless you've got an idea?"

"Lots," Romanova said.

Barton huffed. "Damnit, Nat. Fine. Opinion me later."

Frigga clucked her tongue at Loki. "Child, you know all your plans will come to ruin. Do you not see yourself? You will never fool your father. Nor I. We only want what's best for you. Oh, Nicholas. I'm afraid I must insist."

"You go on insisting. I'm gonna ignore it. He is not going anywhere."
She drew herself up, eyes sad. "You keep him prisoner, and deny him his mother, and sicken him with your poor fare. How should I treat you in return, Nicholas? Should I repay your kindness? Truly?"

"Ma'am, we're thinking of his best interests."

"Are you now?" Frigga's eyes were bright, and she pulled Loki closer to herself again. He was breathing shallowly, eyelids fluttering. "You say I am not? How dare you? My child is ill, Nicholas, and I will stand your obstinacy no longer."

"Then we've got a problem, ma'am," and Fury levelled his gun.

"You risk so much for my child," Frigga said, unperturbed and smiling. "It is truly sweet of you, however little you understand. Very well. I shall leave him but a moment, that he may catch his breath, and we shall discuss matters a little further. Steven, if you would be so kind?"

Steve took Loki's elbow, shifting his weight to him, and the clamminess of his skin took him by surprise.

But his eyes were bright and wicked and, if not entirely clear, lucid. "Say nothing," a tremble against his ear, "and you shall yet survive."

"Why are you doing this?" Steve said back, so low he couldn't hear himself at all, could barely feel his own words.

"Enemy of my enemy," Loki breathed, and began to slither gracefully to his knees, shoulders slumped. "My friend."

Steve grabbed for him, but it was like an eel, and he ended up almost overbalancing, trying to catch him by his armpits.

"My child," Frigga was saying anxiously, "surely you see he cannot stay here."

"Ma'am, we have excellent medical care. We've figured it out okay so far. Step away from him." She looked wounded and bent to touch his hair, looking up at Fury. "How can you possibly believe yourselves right? Do you not know what you are doing? Do you not witness?"

"Mother," a weak sound. "Please. A little longer. Allow me this luxury. I know I do not deserve it, I know I am wretched, but if I may beg it of you -- please. I beg I your indulgence."

Frigga stroked his cheek with the back of her hand, soft and bright with tears. "Oh, child. I will return for you. Very, very soon. I promise."

She rose, lifted her chin, and regarded Fury. "Should we meet once again and you yet deny my claim to him, you shall find me as your Queen."

Blue painted the skin of her wrist, and she was gone.

Loki curled on himself, propping himself up slowly with a hiss and shaking his head. "That did not go as I hoped," wry and breathy, the colour rapidly coming back to his face. "She is persuasive."

"Are you okay?" Tony said over the comm. "Steve, go wide, make him hear me."

"I hear you," Loki said, and took Steve's hand to stand up. "I believe you have a lounge. Rest would be very good at this time."
"Uh, yeah, it's free, come on up, I'll grab you a bed or something. Can't promise I'll shut up, but whatever. I seriously thought she was gonna kill you for a second there."

"My death is not yet to her advantage." It didn't take long for Loki to find his footing, and when he did he shook Steve off but let him pace him all the way to Tony's room.

There was a bed with thick pillows and crisp sheets, and Loki lay down with a pleased murmur. Steve couldn't quite resist fluffing his pillow, but stopped at Loki's incredulous glare.

"Well, you get some rest." Steve patted the bed. "You too, Tony."

"Sure, Steve. Not like I've been doing it all day or anything."

"Captain, we were interrupted."

"Yes, sir," and Steve said goodbye and headed to the same briefing room.

Agent Barton was even more concerned now, maybe crossing from concerned to worried, and he was pacing behind Fury.

"I'm calling it a draw," Fury said. "Sit, Captain. What did we just learn?"

Steve twiddled his thumbs. "They're both manipulative."

"And he talks to you. Agent Barton saw him say something. What was it?"

"'Enemy of my enemy. My friend'," Steve said, and looked up at them. "I don't entirely understand, but he has some sort of plan."

"Does he want to go back to Asgard?" Agent Barton said. "The Chitauri commander's probably going to find it even easier to get at him."

Steve opened his mouth, on the brink of a thought, but couldn't make it come out. "Wouldn't he be ... guarded? While they made a decision?"

Agent Barton raised his eyebrows. "They'd want him where they could keep an eye on him. Chitauri come calling ... I guess that's one way to take them out."

"Would it work?" Fury demanded. "I don't trust those two with each other nearly as far as I can throw them. That woman's damn slippery."

"It could. If they hadn't decided yet." Steve frowned to himself. "If there's a trial they have to bring in the court. That takes time, doesn't it?"

"Well, if he can keep up the act, it's not like they're going to rush. He's not going anywhere, looking like that. I get the feeling they like their punishments public. It could work. I don't know if it will."

"This," Fury said, "is all goddamn speculation. What do we know?"

"We know he doesn't want to die," Barton said. "Past that? Not a clue, sir."

Steve cleared his throat. "Sir, we know he's desperate. If they're really that close to coming he's got to want to get out of here. Everything he's given us is within hit radius. Everything Tony and Doctor Selvig have been working on. They'll have to reconstruct their machines."

"Loki can't afford that, is what you're saying?"
"Yeah. Look, sir, this is the best I can come up with right now. We have a location from the Bifrost data but no coordinates. The portal is a week away from completion. The science dudes can maybe make it work, but we have to send something through to find out. I got nothing."

Fury harrumphed. "Well, it's shit. Tell me when you've got more. Immediately, understand? This is about the goddamn world now. I don't like being played, Agent Barton."

"Yes, sir."

"Barton, partner with Agent Romanova. And get on the engineers, I want them full time on this. Captain, go babysit. See if the Initiative can come up with something."
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

Discussion of manipulation, abuse, gaslighting, references to sexual assault and general coercion.

Tony was still irascible and annoying, which was nice. Soothing, even if it was strained more often than not, with gaps where Tony trailed into looking at things Bruce couldn't see for minutes at a time until Bruce cleared his throat and let him pretend he'd been paying attention.

Mostly Bruce was confused, distracting himself with teamworking the portal calculations, a third bed brought in and shoved against Tony's, the rails in the middle tossed on the floor, and Bruce sat cross-legged on a ridiculously nice mattress and poked Jarvis and tried not to think about it.

But he kept catching glimpses of Loki, fast asleep under the four blankets it'd taken before he stopped shivering and so curled on himself he looked like a snail, the only bits of him visible being some hair, an ear, and his forehead, maybe a quarter of an eye depending on Bruce's angle, and thinking about Frigga and mothers and family and liars and the entire bloody mess.

"I thought Odin was the one we were supposed to hate," Bruce said when they'd simultaneously fucked up one particular very clear and incredibly easy to fix bug in the data.

Tony shifted and winced. "Oh, yeah, didn't you hear the horse story? I mean, how did you miss that, come on, I know you didn't, you're just not thinking, are you," and Tony sounded strangely fond of Bruce when he said that. "Anyway, she's just an evil bitch."

"Are you sure?" Bruce didn't know much about mothers, his had been kind of not really there, but Frigga sounded to him like the kind of mum he'd desperately wanted as a kid, kind of still missed not having once in a while, and watching the footage just made him confused and kind of jealous. But Tony sounded so sure when he said that. "She ... I thought she was nice? I mean, it sounded like she, uh, cared."

"Oh, Bruce. Brucie, Brucie, Brucie." He was rubbing his nose like it hurt. "God, it sucks being the oldest. You wanted a sitcom-mom, didn't you? You know, like -- a mum."

"Yeah. Yeah, I -- yeah. Uh -- yeah, you know, the, uh, kisses on the cheek, 'welcome home', dinner, that stuff. It would've been nice, you know, dinner." He didn't really see the point in stopping himself from fidgeting right now, not when he was so confused he was numb enough the other guy wouldn't have come out for less than a nuclear bomb anyway.

"She reminds me an awful lot of Obie. Obadiah Stane, remember him?" Tony pulled up an article and spun it to face Bruce. STANE KILLED IN TRAGIC ACCIDENT, TONY STARK STILL THE FACE OF STARK INDUSTRIES. "You heard about that, right?"

It rang a bell. He'd been in Georgia at the time, the former South Ossetia, tending wounded at the border, and Stark's issues were still front-page news. He remembered showing one of the soldiers and laughing with her about it. "Test flight fucked up?"
Tony laughed. It was weak and rueful and very, very sorry. "Yeah, yeah, you could say that, but --
but no, actually, no, that's like the furthest thing from what happened, I'm just baffled why that cover
even worked. God bless Pepper, I put her through so much shit, you don't even know. But, yeah, so,
the real story's a little bit different."

"Uh ..." He tried to remember the article. He'd been kind of busy using the newspaper as a mop. "He
was a friend of your dad's, he kind of ran the company and cleaned up after you. Uh, tragic accident.
Beloved, will be missed, etcetera. I'm guessing that's kind of a lie."

"Totally," Tony said, grinning, but it was an awful rictus. "He, uh, I grew up with him, we got real
close after my parents died. He was always a skeevy bastard, used to call me naked from bed, I kept
getting the maid service to leave him jammies but he never wore them, the fucker. But that was just
Obie for you, he did that stuff." He grimaced, hands waving and eventually closing into fists, like he
had more to say but he didn't want to.

"So he was, uh, creepy?" he prompted.

"Oh, yeah, very creepy."

Bruce watched him closely. "Did he touch you?"

Tony coughed a laugh. "God, no, no, nothing like that. Well, I mean -- it got -- there was -- no, I'm
pretty sure that doesn't count, there was this girl, she was like twelve or something, it was -- anyway.
Anyway. But looking back, it was ... it was pretty skeevy. I was pretty much his pet or something,
you know, with the leash and the collar -- metaphorical! strictly metaphorical, okay -- and the 'ha, ha,
my bitch's misbehaving again, ha ha'. I guess that's not much better."

Bruce was really, really glad he was still confused, or he'd have the other guy out already looking for
Obie's grave to rip apart his corpse, and he took deep breaths and pretended he was still working on
the calculations even if he wasn't doing anything really, just to give Tony something to stare at that
wasn't his hands fingering the reactor like that. "Kind of, uh, not really, no. It's ... it's inappropriate. I
think it's inappropriate."

"Yeah. Shit, this stuff is hard. I can tell you about shrapnel and shit, hell, I can tell Selvig about my
parents if he glares me into it, seriously that guy has got a glare, you should take lessons sometime,
but fuck forbid I tell you about Obie, this is ridiculous."

"You don't have to."

Tony scowled. "Actually, I kind of do, it's related, I -- you need to get this, okay? I'm not having this
happen to somebody else, I'm just not. Wait, nevermind, I didn't actually say that, it's not even the
same thing. Just listen. Anyway."

There was a long silence, and Bruce watched Tony force his hands flat on his legs, pressing where
Bruce knew the skin was still burned. But if he needed pain to talk, that was okay. Bruce
understood.

"Right, okay, long story short. I was his golden goose and when I wasn't worth keeping around
anymore, he had me kidnapped, tortured and assassinated. It was a pretty bad assassination, as they
go, I mean, they were amateurs, I've had better attempts, seriously, it's like they were CIA and I was
Castro or something. But anyway, I built the first Iron Man armour and kind of had a bunch of
epiphanies, remind me to tell you about Yinsen sometime, god I didn't deserve him, and anyway I
decided to stop Stark Industries selling weapons."
"The press conference," Bruce said. He'd watched it, actually, watched Stark's return, so much less triumphant than he'd imagined. He'd been glad that Stark was missing, glad that he was probably dead, and he'd hoped no-one found him so they couldn't keep killing. But it hadn't stopped, not for those three months, and Bruce guessed it was Obadiah keeping it going. He remembered the tall, bald man shoving Tony out of the way at the podium, talking over him. He'd approved, actually -- Tony was a loose cannon, it was good that someone could control him.

Like a dog. With a collar. On a leash.

Bruce was a little bit ashamed of himself.

"Yeah, the press conference," Tony said, smirking. "You liked that, didn't you?"

"A little," he admitted.

"Yeah." Tony tapped his fingers. "Anyway, he was doubledealing weapons, and he made his own version of Iron Man, and one night he got tired of dancing around, paralysed me, and took the reactor out of my chest." He glanced down, stroking it again in that creepily intimate way. "I actually seriously thought he was gonna rape me for a minute, but no, he just wanted the reactor, and I wasn't -- I'm not sure it wasn't, actually, him taking it out. He was petting me, there was a thing, I -- I'm -- I'm still not sure, is that weird? That's weird, anyway. Anyway. Moving on! Storytime."

Bruce concentrated very, very, very hard on the calculations and very, very, very hard on keeping down the urge to do something.

Luckily he had a lot of practice, but listening to these things -- listening to Tony talk like it was a deathbed confession and Bruce was going to leave over this, like he'd judge him -- never actually got all that much easier, and it was so much worse with Tony, because Tony was an annoying little shit, but he spoke Bruce's language and that was so, so rare. "So, uh, he died?" once he'd swallowed down outrage into professional calm.

"Yeah, I killed him after he beat the shit out of me," and Bruce couldn't help jerking a little at how candid Tony sounded, like it was just fact and he couldn't do much about it. Which was true, but -- but, he'd still murdered Obadiah. Whatever he did, it wasn't ... Bruce didn't know what to think.

"I was worthless, apparently. A trial. An embarrassment, and he'd been putting up with me for, you know, Howard's sake, as long as I kept churning out designs. But uh, you know, I kind of ... pissed him off, with the weapons thing and the whole arc reactor he couldn't actually get anyone to reproduce, because I am Tony fucking Stark and I am a fucking genius."

He didn't sound happy about it, and when Bruce glanced over he'd stopped tracing the reactor and was just touching it, fingers in the center and chewing the skin off his lips. It sounded like a curse, the way he said it. It's a terrible privilege, and -- yeah. Bruce could see that too. "There's, uh, there's a thing, uh, emotional abuse. It ... sounds like that."

"I hate," pointing, "those words. Both of them. I was not abused, okay? He was just -- I was just -- I'm not convincing you, am I? God, I don't know why I even bother, you've obviously made up your mind. You know, I could've sworn I had a point when I started spilling my guts, there was a reason."

"The queen," he prompted, and Tony gave him a thumbs up. His gratitude was almost embarrassing to Bruce, but he was pretty sure it was worse for Tony. "You said she reminded you of him. Uh, similar behaviour?"

"Yeah, yeah, see, what she does -- the way she is with him? That -- that is ... pretty much, exactly,
pitch-perfect almost, the way Obie was with me."

Bruce was starting to make out the shape of what Tony said, of what Bruce might actually have been doing to Tony in even asking why, and he really didn't like it. "I'm sorry, Tony, you don't have to --"

"I do, shut up, I do, you have to get this, you don't get it. It was different words, I wasn't his kid, but the whole thing of ... I mean, the way she was. Exactly like that. Like -- okay. Did they tell you they loved you? Ever? Did they show you?"

He couldn't help chuckling. "Uh, no. That was, uh, not ... not the ... it wasn't really relevant to their, uh, interests."

"So you're primed to take this shit at face value, right? It didn't happen to you, so you got this idea, and it's like, you know, I, I get a bit about wanting to believe --"

Bruce swallowed hard, fidgeting. "Yeah, that's ... true. The -- yeah, I used to watch TV and pretend, and my girlfriend, I ... uh, that explains a lot about why I fucked it up with her, actually."

"God, me too, with the pretending and shit. Did you ever read -- like, you read these books sometimes, the children's books with the pictures, and they're like happy families and shit and you wish --"

"Yeah, those, yeah, the library and I just kept --"

"Borrowing them, right? Like, you stole them or something and you were like 'please God, please God', right?" Bruce couldn't help laughing, and Tony wasn't far behind. "I know, right? So pathetic, god. You should've seen me and Pepper, we -- yeah. She deserves a goddamn medal. Like -- a Nobel Patience Prize or something. Tony Stark Endurance trophy. Everybody deserves that medal," grinning.

"We're -- we're so fucked up. You're, uh, you're aware of that, right? This is not a normal conversation."

"Yeah, yeah, that's why we get on. We're sciencebros, we don't do normal, normal is for Steve and squares and squares named Steve. Fistbump, come on."

Bruce obliged, much more at ease. It wasn't so bad if Tony could still do that.

"Okay." Tony sighed explosively. "Okay. Back on topic, which we left, like, eight million miles back, love. Luuuurve." He grimaced. "I hate that word. Anyway, listen up, you're getting a life lesson in love from the great, fabulous, extremely stylish Tony Stark, billionaire extraordinaire."

"Should I put my hand up if I have a question?"

"God, no, you'll make me feel old."

"You are old," Bruce said.

"Shut it, wayward pupil. So. The way they say it, how Obie said it, didn't mean love, like -- you know, affection or whatever. I don't have anything against, you know, sincerity, it's great, that's fantastic, love is a, a many-splendoured thing, shut up I totally know that phrase. Anyway, there are two parts to this and I hate both of them. First part is when they tell you and it means, I am nice to you, I will love and tolerate you, but that's -- that's it, I tell you that because I want you to believe it so you do what I want. It's basically self-interest, like, don't pee on the floor, because I love you enough to think you're better than that even though you're like a week old and you're not even potty
trained. Like that, you know, it's, it's unreasonable. Any questions from the peanut gallery?"

Bruce put his hand up.

"What? I told you not to do that, you're horrible, I feel ancient. What?"

"Can I go to the bathroom?"

"Go fuck yourself. But don't it yet, I'm not finished, do it after. After, okay, pee in a bottle or something, use that. Part two. Part two -- oh, my God, I wasn't fucking serious, Bruce, you're a dick, Jarvis tell him he's a dick, I'm the comic relief."

Bruce was okay with hamming it up some more if it meant Tony looked a little less pinched. "You're, uh, not actually very funny. It works better if you're ... funny."

"Slander. Lies and slander, I'll spank you. I'm headmaster here, I will, don't push me."

"The other guy won't like that."

"He doesn't like anything. Except me, because I'm special. He saved me from certain death. Did I mention I saved your life? Like -- have I not said that today? I totally did. That's why you should listen to me."

Bruce snorted and Tony patted his shoulder companionably, then went on, coming back to the seriousness that never quite left.

"Part two is the clincher, it's seriously the worst. People listen to this shit, like they stand right there all the fucking time and they're listening and it's not even what he said, really, you know, it's the way he said it."

"Attack patterns," Bruce said, nodding.

"You've got to tell me this shit sometime. But yeah, they're still like, oh, he's such a good guy, you're so lucky you've got him, Tony, isn't he great, and you're just standing there cold all over and you feel absolutely fucking crazy. I can't stress that enough. Completely fucking crazy. And, you know, you can't -- you just give in after a while, because you're completely fucking crazy anyway, right? And it's so nice and generous and awesome of this guy to put up with your total fucking crazy, and you feel crazier, and he's nicer, and you get crazier, and it's like this shit spiral. Shit spirals are full of shit, by the way, it's -- it's their thing."

"And you think that's what the queen's doing to Loki." Bruce considered. "It explains a lot about how he reacts to us. I mean, uh, it's not like we've been trying to do anything but, you know, put out his fires. I guess I can see how that'd be, uh, confusing if he's used to being punished at random. The randomness is part of it, right?"

"Yeah, it's totally pavlovian, and it's not like, you know, I don't think she stopped, I think she's got some serious grudging going on. You know, like, Howard was a total shit, right, but at least he didn't tell me to my face that he loved me, meant it, actually meant it, and did that. You know, they, they mean it, in their own fucked up reality. So it's like they're not actually lying, you're just crazy, but it's how they say it. You know how that works now, right?"

Bruce thought about how people reacted to the other guy, the insincerity of 'oh, no, it's fine' and 'it's not your fault' and 'you can't help it'. He really, really hated that last one. "Yeah, a bit. Obie resented Howard?"
"Boy howdy did he." Tony was grim. "Howard was the superstar, the genius, and Obie was his fucking sidekick. He was smart, definitely, but he didn't stand a chance next to Howard. Nobody did."

"And Odin brought home a kid and dumped it on her?" Bruce tried to think how his mum would've reacted if his dad did that and mostly came up with what happened when she found out about his cheating. He'd spent a day cooling his heels in the hospital waiting room while a cop talked to him about bad touch and 'does he make you feel ...' and tried to get him to admit his home life sucked until his dad walked out with stitches and a prescription. Explosive, definitely.

Tony laughed. "I bet that didn't go down well. But he's Odin, right? He's the king and shit and it's not like she can be like, no, I'm not doing this, so she basically had to, right? I mean, that's ... it's shit for, like, everybody involved. What's the betting he told her, like, it's -- like if somebody brought home one of those really ugly slugs or something and told you you had to raise it like it was your own kid, right? Like, it's a slug, and he says it's your kid now, shut up. I dunno about you, but I'd be pissed."

Bruce cleared his throat. "I wouldn't take it out on the slug, though. I mean, it's ... it's not its fault he's crazy. I wouldn't, uh, do that."

"Well, yeah, but it's not like I'd pet it or something. Slime, ew. So -- I mean -- I hate it. I really fucking hate it, but I can kind of get why, you know? I mean, it was Howard Obie had to deal with, for like thirty years, all the fucking time. And she has to deal with Odin all the fucking time. Like, I'd go crazy, you'd go crazy, everybody goes crazy. But we have to keep her away from him, she's just going to keep fucking him up until he snaps."

"More crazy is definitely not what he needs," Bruce said, and glanced at the other bed, eyeing the steady monitors, the vague shifts of his sleeping brainwaves. "Are those earbuds?"

"Yeah, he wouldn't sleep without a direct line to Jorge. It was pretty pathetic but, you know, it's something I can do when I'm like this, so. He's been sleeping all day. I think he was pretending a bit, at least a bit, nobody goes down that pretty, but god, whatever she did, he's zonked. Wouldn't notice a Hulk." He waggled his eyebrows.

Bruce picked up what he wasn't saying. "You think I should stick around. For the other guy."

"Yeah. Be a perfect time to do a little snatching and grabbing, wouldn't it?" Tony made awkward faces. "I mean, if you can stand me, I know I'm kind of, you know."

"No, it just, uh, we weren't normal anyway, right? It kind of helps, actually, I'm not the most fucked up one in a room. That's always ... awkward."

"Oh. Well, well, that's good, yeah," but Tony sounded way too relieved not to have actually been worried.

Bruce lifted a fist. "We're ... we're sciencebros. We ... stick together. Yeah?"

"Hell yeah, sciencebros unite," and the touch of Tony's knuckles made him feel better about everything. Friends were really nice to have sometimes.

"I believe you. What you said. You, uh, you know that, right?"

"I know. Thanks. Here's a hall pass, go pee."
Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

A rather pleasant interlude, at least by this fic's standards. :P

"Take a break, Agents Barton, Romanova."

She touched her comm, not quite sure if to question or not, but let the silence stand in for one as she glanced at Clint, who rubbed an exhausted hand across his face and shrugged back.

Fury sighed. "Look, I'm mad as hell. But I know when I've pushed too hard, and you've been working for weeks. Especially you, Romanova. Take a break. Go team-build or something, the Initiative could use the work. Maybe you'll come up with something."

"That's a working holiday, sir," she said, already redirecting to find Cap, Clint falling in beside her.

"Best I can do, Agents."

"Yes, sir," they chorused.

Clint smirked at the corner of her eye, settling into a lope she'd seen him maintain for days. "Shawarma again?"

"We already did that. Something different."

"Might as well grab fake Chinese, they like me. Indian? Banner likes that, right?"

"Yeah."

"I'll grab it. If we're doing it in Stark's room, hippo'll be there too. We putting him in?"

"Yeah, make sure you get enough. Put it on my expenses," she said, and Clint peeled off, scaling the wall as she descended to Cap's gym room.

He was hugging a punching bag, leaning in on it with his chin against the top, and she paused just inside the doorway. "Team dinner."

"I'll be there in a minute."

She ignored the dismissal and assessed him, and didn't like it. "Did you sleep?"

"Few hours." Cap stepped away, wiping sweat off his forehead and into his hair, and unwrapped his hands. "I usually can't get more than that. The serum. How's Tony?"

Natasha leaned against the doorframe. She seriously doubted the serum was the only thing keeping him awake. "Pretty good. He's holed up in the infirmary with Doctors Selvig and Banner until the tent's fixed."

Cap looked more like himself when he glanced at her again and followed her path to the infirmary. She doubted he knew the entire base yet. "I could eat a little."
"You could shower," she said delicately.

"I will. They have them in sickbay, don't they?"

"Stark's room has one. He insisted."

Cap made a sound under his breath and when they arrived Stark pointed him into the bathroom, pinching his nose.

She glanced around the room. Two beds pushed together. Selvig looked uncomfortable but not offended at leaning over the railing next to Banner.

Natasha leaned next to him, mentally reserving the spot next to Stark's head for Clint. She could eat off his knees, he wouldn't mind.

They seemed mostly to be quizzing Loki on how much of the Tesseract's functions were encapsulated in Stark's reactor, and she let herself relax a little. Not letting her guard down, never, but relaxing into something like standby.

"Barton got food, right?" Stark said to her. He looked much better with the bandages off, and if his skin looked new and was patchily pink in places, she assumed it was because he hadn't done a good enough job convincing Loki fully healing him was worth it. "I mean, he's not going off to Bosnia or something and leaving us to starve, right?"

"Of course not," she said lazily. "He'd shoot you a note."

"I hope you're not being literal."

Natasha raised an eyebrow.

"Damn. You know he takes that too far, right? One day he'll grow feathers -- that's not a suggestion, Argue-Argue, I don't care if you're sleeping," Tony said to the whimpering bundle in the third bed against the wall. He was twitching, visible fingers slowly clawing their way down into the mattress, bits and pieces slowly piling up around the hole.

"He's been like that for a few hours," Banner said. "We, uh, didn't think waking him up was a good idea."

"Not like I care," Stark said. "As long as he's quiet I don't mind. He just doesn't shut up. I'm the motormouth, he can wait his turn."

Natasha didn't buy his nonchalance for a second, and the nod and mug of coffee Selvig slipped her said she wasn't meant to. She mouthed a thank you back and let it warm her hands a little.

"Okay, just, if he does, if you're secretly listening to this, Loki, I want warning, I'll video it and put it up on YouTube. Bet you I'll get like fifty million views."

"You know he'll just say that's pathetic, right?" Banner said.

Stark waved off the superiority. "I'm sorry, which of us tried to talk the Hulk to death? I'd say that's pretty pathetic, don't you?"

She interrupted before Banner could cringe. "'Argue-Argue'?"

"If he's not deciding on Miss or Mister I'm not either," Stark said. "So there, Argue-Argue." He stuck out his tongue.
There was a chair ready for a damp Cap to appear at Stark's other side, dressed down in shirt and slacks, and though Selvig gave Loki's shaky mewl a complicated look nothing nothing happened.

Natasha just had to accept that for better or worse this was her team, pending prisoners and auxillaries.

Her team.

Well, then.

"I bring good eats," Clint announced, waking her from her half-doze, and she straightened up a bit more and reached for the bags with gimme hands. "I have ... everything. I mean, literally, I just told them to give me the whole menu -- sorry about your accounting, Nat --"

"It's all right," she said, snatching a bag, confirming the crinkle and tearing open prawn chips, savouring the sensation of letting it melt on her tongue. "You have brought food. I forgive you."

"Just dump it in the middle or something, Jarvis, move it," and Clint took his spot next to her, letting her set her container on his legs while he held his to his chest, and they all dug into the food. She was pretty hungry, actually, and she glared at Clint when he shot her a smirk.

"This counts for the week," she told him, digging into pad thai, dripping with lemon slices she'd traded from Banner.

"I just worry about you," Clint said, and took an enormous bite of mushu pork, probably to stop her from saying anything further for fear of getting bits in her face when he inevitably tried to retort with food in his mouth.

It worried her sometimes how well they knew each other, but it was to be expected.

Both Banner and Cap were demolishing the food, Selvig politely stealing containers under Stark's arguments with them about which boxes were which and who had enough world-saving badass points to be worthy of the spring rolls.

Clint got into it, too, and she kept quiet and listened to them all, letting the silences and hesitances and constant interruptions as they all tried to avoid rubbing each other the wrong way wash over her. Natasha noted it all, tracked insecurities and histories, lies and omissions and discomforts, and let them be catalogued without her involvement.

It was refreshing. She stretched her back a little, the twinge of an old scar telling her she was on the edge of losing her advantage and really should take the opportunity to stand down when she could.

Loki stiffened under the blankets and the team gave each other nerdy glances at the briprbirpbrirpbrirpbripipipipi as his heartbeat picked up hard and inhumanly fast, and pretended not to be listening to how his lungs hitched, the way he levered himself upright elbows-first, head pressed into the mattress and gasping against the sheets.

Natasha let him have a minute to tremble, but didn't look away. "Why don't you push the bed closer?"

"What?" very soft, and he coughed, tilting his face to look at her with the same madness she'd seen in the cell, eyes unnaturally, brightly glass-blue and not seeing her at all, looking past at something that terrified him enough to force a death head's grin.

He was fighting it, though, groaning and shaking his head, low involuntary noises in his throat as he
pushed his face against the sheets again. It sounded like it hurt, the way she remembered Clint thrashing against the restraints as he began to surface. She doubted Clint remembered it.

"Wait," Clint murmured, ready beside her. "Give him a chance, guys." She put her hand between them over the food, meeting the others' eyes to back him up, and Stark didn't look happy, snapping bracelets onto his wrists, but he nodded.

Banner just kept eating like he was snatching a bite between missions, grimly shovelling it in, and she turned her attention back to Loki.

"What," low and confused and much less confident. "You said -- you said ... what did you say? You did speak, did you not?"

"Yeah, I said, why don't you push the bed closer? Give us more room."

Loki blinked at her again, lifting his head this time, and though his face was teartracked, his eyes were more complicated, strangely innocent as he scanned the room. "Ah."

He moved like everything hurt, but he pulled the bed towards them anyway, clearly unbalanced and trying to resettle himself with obedience in the hope completing his task would tell him something. She'd been there before, too many times, and she leaned across Stark and touched a corner of the mattress when it was close enough, unsurprised to find it soaked cold.

Cap got up and held out a towel. "Tell you what, why don't we take care of that and you wash up a bit, all right?"

Loki stared, standing lax and completely not comprehending.

"He's not listening to anyone but you right now," Clint murmured. "Think that's on purpose?"

"Wouldn't bet against it," she said back, not missing the way his gaze snapped to her, waiting and hopeful and lost. Latching like a lost chick even as he snarled and rubbed his face against his shoulder to brush off tears. She imagined Frigga doing this over and over, binding him a little closer each time, and loathed her. She understood what had to be done to keep hold of the enemy child of an enemy. She did. She hated it all the same.

"Loki," she said, and gave her food to Clint for safekeeping. "Might want to just get a new bed," she said to Cap, taking the towel, and beckoned to Loki, hating how he obeyed her without thought. "Will you come with me?"

There was a half-second of hesitation before he fell into step, and that was enough to tell her he was slowly winning, blinking hard and gesturing like he was shaking off a great weight.

She sat on the closed lid of the toilet and studied the wall as Loki leaned into the spray, ignoring the choked noises, the angry, tearing sobs, the way he pulled at his hair and bent cursing and wretched beneath the spray, letting it beat down on his back for a long time until he'd finished crying.

"They saw, did they not?" Loki said, toneless again, but a glance at his feet told her his mind was his again, posture braced arrogant if not entirely confident.

Natasha nodded agreement, crossing her legs and leaning against the wall. "The queen's rather heavyhanded."

"She is ..." The words sounded like they took a lot of effort, syllables spaced slow. "She is not to blame. She wishes me not to be hurt."
"I didn't say anything about that," Natasha said. "Just that if she keeps overdoing it, it's going to stop working."

"It almost has," Loki said in completely unsurprising confirmation, taking the towel she held out when she heard the water stop. "If I can lie well enough, she will believe and act accordingly."

Natasha knew how that went. She also knew how rarely it actually worked. Half the point of being stripped that deeply was being watched constantly for the first little while to make sure the imprint sunk in. But desperate times, desperate measures.

"Romanova."

He looked almost shy and very resentful of his uncertainty, a towel wrapped around him under his armpits, the other dangling from his hand and his hair curling damp. "Doctor Banner -- he ... my hair -- I think --?" He hissed, more to himself than her. "Do not concern yourself --"

"No, I get it. Grounding, right? It helps," she said, and got up, brushing off her hands and taking the towel. "Sit down, then."

He sat, and she wasn't surprised when he leaned into her hands as she squeezed out the water, methodically drying each section and wiping water off his neck and shoulders along the way.

"I found a comb. Want me to brush it?"

A soft exhale, and he tugged at his hair, massing it for her to drape the towel under it. "It was the Chitauri," he said after she'd done half. "They took advantage. The queen does not lower herself so far as to haunt my sleep."

"I didn't think so." Natasha methodically got rid of the rest of the water, picking out tangles until it flowed through the teeth and fell easily around his face. "There's probably some food left, if you're hungry."

"I am. Romanova ..." Loki bowed his head. "The time I shall be delivered to my deserved fate approaches. You cannot interfere, you cannot change it, you cannot stop it. You snivelling, soft-hearted fools."

She knew what he wanted to say, heard it in his awkwardly precise touch to her forearm, such a contrast to his tone, and took his warning as intended. "You're welcome."

He stood, then, turning to look down at her, and she was reminded again that he was at least a foot taller than her and much, much stronger. If he wanted to crush her head in his hand, he very well could.

Even like this, his harshly-angled face thinned by fluros and clutching a towel around himself, wearing a smile that lightened his face to curiosity as though she was a puzzle he wanted to either please or solve, he was intensely, massively, problematically compromised.

But she wasn't all that afraid. The one thing that scared her was the Hulk, and he wasn't here.

Cap knocked on the door. "Yeah?"

"His clothes are dry."

"Thanks," and she opened the door a crack, handing them over to Loki. "Two minutes. Then I'm coming back in."
He nodded and she closed the door behind him, letting him have time to compose himself the rest of the way.

It didn't surprise her when he climbed onto the bed between her and Cap. She'd taken a position that mirrored Clint's, a fresh box open in her hand. Loki reached for one of the containers scattered over Stark's legs, eyeing all of them, but aside from muttered greetings and having a staring match with Selvig, Stark launching into a fresh interrogation that made Loki roll his eyes, none of them did anything to stop him.

"That's his for the week," she told Clint, and ducked when he tossed a pea at her, catching it in her mouth. "Yum."

"I have had none of this before," Loki remarked once they'd continued not to take any of it away from him and he'd unbent a little. "What is it?"

"Oh, my God, seriously," because it was clearly Stark's mission in life to bother everyone around him into enlightenment, and Natasha rescued another box and settled in to watch the show, trading resigned glances with Clint as Loki puffed up like an outraged cat at being called Argue-Argue three times in twenty seconds and Stark backpedalled.

"I know," he mouthed back, rolling his eyes in exasperation, but there was an affectionate edge she shared.

"You have to try this, Cap, you've got some chicken left, right, Loki, try the chicken, this is awesome, tell me what you think, I think it's awesome, if you don't I'll make your stitching black, I can still change it," and they fell into plying him with an array of the various flavours, guessing what was in them and giving increasingly absurd explanations for the crunchy little sticks at the bottom until Selvig informed them and was immediately proclaimed a spoilsport.

Her team plus one recalcitrant prisoner, she supposed. She could work with that.
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

I am sick as a dog, so if I've missed anything or something doesn't make sense, feel free to point it out. (That goes for when I'm not sick, too.)

Mmm, culture clash. Anyone else looking forward to Thor 2 in November? I am!
Characterisation marches on!

Loki’s expression was so unimpressed it was pressed as a crinkly boho skirt. "You bargained once. You must bargain again if you wish to gain more."

Tony waved his hands, because seriously, couldn't see how much his arms still hurt? "You only did half before you went all rip van winkle on me. I gave you two earbuds."

The face just got worse, and how'd they mistake him for an adult anyway? It was so classic teen, that face. "You have four limbs."

"Okay, but, I mean --"

"You will disturb the beast."

Tony glanced over at Bruce, sleeping flat on his stomach with the covers pulled over his head, and had to admit Loki kind of had a point. Bruce lasted a good long while considering the situation and all, but right now it was just Tony and Loki, the others going off somewhere or other and Romanova talking about her bed like it was the best thing in the world and Selvig talking up the data they'd managed to link between Mjolnir, the Tesseract and Tony's reactor in the same exact tone as he went to the pavilion, which was just -- he didn't know what it was. Clearly they all needed some fresh air.

Except the nurses wouldn't let him out because he was still technically sixty percent burnt, even if it was only a really bad sunburn right now. But it was a lot of sunburn and he kind of needed to be down there pronto because they couldn't find their asses without him and Loki was being a stubborn little shit.

"Aren't you interested in this at all?" Tony asked, because, hey, yeah, actually, he really would like to know. "I mean, half this stuff could help you, most of it, and you're keeping me here when I could be down there working on stuff that might, I dunno, save your ass? Like, why?"

Loki was quiet and smiling. "Your efforts do not matter."

Tony just pulled down his sunglasses and stared. "You're worse than Bruce. Congratulations, I mean that, I thought he was a martyr but you've got the market cornered. What are you gonna do with it? Cry until somebody sells you blue-chip stock? What? Help me out here."

"Endure," Loki said.

"I kind of believe in living, you know. Surviving's no fun. Hanging on by the skin of your teeth's no fun either. Might as well arrange it so you enjoy it. You know, live a little, do stuff, not just be like 'I might die today'. I mean, are you trying to make yourself more depressed? Do you just have no faith
in us? What about me? I'm pretty faith-worthy."

"I am a god, mortal." He laughed, way too composed for somebody talking about what Tony figured
pretty much amounted to horrible, horrible torture. "You overestimate yourself. If all holds true, you
will not know how much. Know this, if you insist -- I will answer for what I have done." He spread
his hands. "I did not act without knowledge of my consequences. I never did. I simply did not, and
do not, care."

Tony just had to stare some more. "Wait, so you knew you were going to die a horrible death and
you just went and did it anyway? I don't think Asgard's gonna be friendly. And you knew that? And,
wait, Chitauri guy? Thanos? You knew? And you still did it? Are you just that reckless? Do you just
hate yourself that much? You might actually be worse than me at this point."

Loki paused his pacing, steps slow and infuriatingly steady. "If you have not noticed," wry, "I am a
monster, mother to monsters, of monstrous mind. A creature such as I was never to pass peacefully."

"So basically you've given up."

"It would be briefly entertaining to have you attempt to evade Frigga. Very briefly." Loki shrugged,
still way too calm about it all. "I have always known I was never intended to live, Stark. This be the
way -- so shall it be."

"Fuck that," Tony said. "Heal me, you emo little shitbag, and we'll see about kicking fate in the ass."

He laughed at that, then settled into curiosity. "You are serious."

"Sure am. Come on, get me up. Let's pretend -- let's pretend a moment you actually try, shall we?
You, work with me, you work with us, you do it seriously, and we'll see how far it gets us. I'm
betting damn far. You want to give up? I won't let you. Not without trying. Or can't you beat some
measly mortals at their own game?" Tony pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and sneered.
"Bring it."

"Very well. I shall amuse you, for a time." Loki came to stand over him, head tilted, but he didn't
reach for Tony's hand, or leg, or anything, he was reaching for his chest.

He put a protective hand over it, eyeing him suspiciously. "Watch it."

Loki rolled his eyes, hand poised about five inches from the back of his hands. "I am not interested in
your paltry almagams. I would know more of the structure beneath."

"Oh. Uh, it's to keep me alive. Shrapnel in my heart. Bits of metal. It's a giant magnet."

"I would satisfy my curiosity if you would allow it. It will be passing strange, but it will not hurt."

Tony narrowed his eyes, still clutching protectively. "What do you want to do?"

"I wish to feel," Loki said, and what the fuck did that even mean, and then his hand was going
through, and he felt his fingers inside.

"F*ck," he said, or meant to say, but it came out as a gargle. "Weird," he managed, once he
convinced himself he could actually breathe even though there were fingers. Exploring. Cold,
exploring fingers tracing the inside of the reactor housing like it was a tinkertoy set, Jesus.

His hands slipped right through Loki's arm like air when he tried to swat him, and Tony braced
himself and swallowed, watching him feel around, frowning with his eyes half-closed like he was
looking for something.

"If you don't start telling me exactly what you're doing," through his teeth, "I will fucking crucify you."

Loki hummed. "Do not panic. As I said, I will not take your false heart from you. The one whom performed its transplant was of an unusual mind, and I am learning its intricacies. I would know of this person."

"How'd you know it wasn't a team or something, anyway?"

"You are alive," Loki said, and god, his fingers were in his heart, they were IN HIS FUCKING HEART, and Tony seriously couldn't decide if he was more fascinated or dizzy with horror at Loki's fingers in his fucking heart. "Who were they? Its understructure is embedded into your ribs," obviously an afterthought since he'd already fucking moved, but Jesus, at least it was something explaining why Loki was rooting around in his lungs. "I am learning its shape."

"Yinsen," Tony said, swallowing. "Ho Yinsen. He was a good man. A really -- really good man. Smart. Stupid, he thought I was better than he was. But good. A great assistant. You can tell?"

Loki hummed again. "Know this: there are few with the purity of heart to attempt this. Fewer still with the skill. It was was not luck, Man of Iron, to find such a man at the moment he became greater than his self and wrought this. Surely you have suspected."

"I don't believe in fate. Sure as hell tempted to sometimes, though." He jerked his chin, squinching his eyes shut. "You done?"

There was a long, long silence, and when Tony peeked Loki was watching him, somehow swallowed by his coat and the clothes into something almost human. "I can remove the shrapnel, if you wish it. Your imitation would not be harmed."

"Get out of me."

Loki withdrew, taking a step back, and somehow his hand was clean and dry even though he'd just been groping his fucking lungs, ghosting inside him in places Tony couldn't ever, ever scrub off the feel of it, and he scrabbled at his shirt to check everything was there.

"Look, I've spent a long goddamn time being okay with this, and you just had to go fucking say that. What do you want? You're not stupid, you know exactly how much that -- I'm very interested in not having bits of shit in my heart, okay? But I'm not interested in whatever the hell you want from me, there's a catch here, I know there's a catch."

He came closer again, smiling. "Are you not interested in what you could gain from me?"

"Are you blackmailing me into letting you heal me? Seriously?" Tony groaned. "What the fuck is wrong with you? That's not how it works! Why does this matter?"

"You require opportunity and yet you deny it," Loki said, very serious. "You speak of living as though it is above survival and yet you live your days at the whim of your inevitable, dishonourable demise."

Tony screeched, because he just had to right now, okay, he had to. "Hold the fuck up. This is about honour?"

Loki tilted his head like he was actually confused. "Do you not wish to enter Valhalla?"
"SWEET FELCHING JESUS DO NOT MAKE ME THOR."

"What?"

"I," Tony snarled, "I am a sciencebro. I don't want any fucking Valhalla, you patronising little creep. I want sciencebro heaven. I do not want to be stuck with a bunch of warriors when I could be doing. Fucking. SCIENCE!"

Loki giggled, actually swaying back with it when it developed into laughter. "Your concerns may be justified."

"But you're not actually not going to stop if I don't come up with a better reason," Tony said warily. "What's wrong with you? Is the nightmares? I mean, they happen all the time, we know something's coming."

That actually got a smile. "Witless mortal."

"There you go with the w, seriously, the w nouns, this is ridiculous, you have a fetish, right? You totally do." Tony rubbed his eyes. "Okay, so you're way too creepy and cryptic to actually tell me stuff, right? You actually want me to figure out shit, which, okay, I'm good at that. But I need something more to work with here, I'm not a magician."

"I am." Loki looked contemplative. "You are as fleas," he said suddenly. "You are fleshy and tiny and strange. I took your hearth from you and cast it to ash, and yet you have delayed your promised vengeance for the sake of a child you thought no more than a tale. I would not have debt to such a creature as you."

Tony tapped his fingers, using the beat to organise himself a bit. Loki actually sounded like he wasn't lying, and he wasn't even following up to hammer it in, he just let it hang there. That -- actually made sense, though, if it was about Jorgumandr. If Tony had kids he wouldn't want them held over his head either. "You know I wouldn't hurt him, right?"

"For some reason you do not focus my wrongs upon him." A minute shrug. "For the moment."

"How about never? You're an ornery little shit, that's not his fault. I won't hurt him. You can hold me to that. You know what. I'll hold me to it, no fees, no wriggling out of it. If he needs a new tail, we'll give it, and we can't promise that won't hurt, but if it's not, like, helping him, actually helping, we won't."

Loki stepped forward, frowning. "He is injured? What have you done?"

Oh, God. Oh, God. "You don't know?"

"Mortal," a growl. "You will tell me of this. Now."

"He did it to himself! That's what happens, you grow up somewhere too small, it just -- he crushed himself, okay? He's too big for, I dunno, everything. He's too -- he just --" Tony sighed. "He just ... found somewhere, he probably thought it was big enough, probably he didn't even know, and he just laid down and grew and grew and he just ... waited."

The look on Loki's face was terrible. "For me."

Tony grimaced. "Well, I mean -- it could've -- oh, fuck it, it won't help. Yeah, I think so. He's probably not feeling it anymore, if that helps. Like, I don't actually think it hurts him. It's just -- yeah. Sorry."
Loki had his eyes squeezed shut, and he was swaying a little, and god, his broken little whisper was something Tony never, ever wanted to hear again. "Why did you not tell me?"

"I thought you knew," Tony said. "I really, honestly thought you knew, but -- God, I fucked up. I'm sorry, I really am. Just. Sorry."

"He is trapped, then," he murmured, still strange and dry. "He is vulnerable. If he is trapped, he can be found." Tony watched Loki's hands curl and curl until he had to sit up to see where the plink-plink-plink noise was coming from.

"Dude, your hands."

"What?" Loki opened his eyes a little and glanced down like he hadn't even known he was doing it, opening them to a bloody mess. "Oh."

Tony really, really hoped he wasn't going to cry. "Look, I -- I'll look after him. I know you think you're going to get kidnapped or something, look, I wanna avoid that, everybody wants to avoid that, but if I can't, we'll look after him. Hell, I think even Fury likes him, he's pretty cute, you know, it was cute. We'll do that. I'm a shit but I can, like, lower him a TV or something, like, you know, one that won't explode. Something."

"I have no choice," Loki said, and looked up. Tony winced. It was actually worse than if he'd been crying. This was just ... devastation and determination and all sorts of very, very bad things. "I must leave. I must ..." He looked away. "I regret I cannot keep my word. I realise you bargained for knowledge you sorely need, and I cannot give it. I must go."

"Stooooooop right there. Sit. Talk to me. Why? Is somebody going to try for him? Because, you know, dude, there's a whole lot of payload down there to take out, like, anything that tries."

Loki smiled a little. "If you have found him, so has my mother, and you tell me he cannot escape her." The smile grew edges. Lots of edges. "I am surprised I have not yet woken to a scale upon my pillow."

"That's sick," Tony said, grossed out. "She'd do that?"

His eyes slid to the side. "I am useful. Moreso with... reason, to be so. You cannot protect him."

"Maybe, maybe not, but we'll put up a hell of a fight, and, you know, I'm not exactly seeing you fighting, here. Maybe she won't go for him. Maybe she just wants you to think she will so she doesn't have to, like, break a fingernail or something actually putting some goddamn effort into it. Seriously, people like that are fucking lazy, they want everybody else to do everything so they can get all the credit. You're a shitload of things, but nobody'd call you lazy. Come on, she's lazy, isn't she?"

Loki twitched, and it wasn't anything he could pick out but it was something, and it was encouraging, he'd run with it.

"I'll tell you what else. If you think I'm going to let you go off and offer yourself at the altar of Odin's fucking mercy, I will box your goddamn ears. I'll make Romanova do it. Maybe Bruce will Hulk and do it, I'll make it happen if I have to, I will, actually, I will, because -- because -- this is wrong. This is just wrong. I'm offended. I have better things to do with my time than go around being offended, so when I'm offended, it's really goddamn fucking offensive, okay? Just -- god, just sit, you're giving me a crick in my neck."

Loki silently sat on the edge of the bed, and if he was still higher up than Tony at least he wasn't
looming.

He squirmed a bit to sit up and poked Loki until he was looking at him, not at his hands. The world did not need more shitty poetry wailing about the luscious colour of blood something, Tony was so over it.

"You are not the only one this shit happens to. Get that through your head. Part of the fucking point is that you feel like you are the only fucking one in the fucking universe, and nobody will ever understand your pain because you are the craziest, specialiest little fuck in all the world. Sound familiar? Ringing any bells?" Tony rapped his fist against Loki's head, ignoring the wide-eyed stare, the burning cold on his knuckles. "Knock knock?"

"There are no men like me," Loki said, and Jesus, he was whining, that was totally whining, it was precious.

"Well, duh, you're not always one, that's a bit redundant, it's a shitty one-liner anyway. Am I just wasting oxygen here? Smarten. The. Fuck. Up. You are not a special snowflake. You are not misunderstood and you can't be taped together by a nice mortal girl loving away your sparkly pain. You're a fucked up little kid that's somehow fucking growing on me, I don't even know why, and you're so scared half the time I don't even know which cat you've got at the wheel."

He rolled his eyes and brushed flaking blood off his hands, the slices on his palms already mostly scarred up. "Are you attempting anything other than boring me to your death?"

Tony poked him again, tsking. "Pay attention. I'm the last person to be like 'rar, fear is for the weak'. Like -- okay, I shit my suit, I hugged a nuke and I shit my fucking suit. Point is, I get being scared for your kid. I get being scared of Thanos and your mum and the Chitauri and, god, I don't know, seaweed or something. But you can't let it make your fucking decisions. You have a noggin, damnit. Right here." He knocked his fist against his head again. "Use it."

"My position is untenable," Loki muttered, glaring at Tony like it was all his fault. "I must act."


Loki snarled and got up to pace and pace and pace and pace until Tony was getting enough of a headache from it that he gave up on watching and just lay down. If Loki wanted something, he'd just have to say something, Tony couldn't be bothered with body language.

"I shall remain until they come for me."

"Finally! A thought!" Tony said, gesturing to the ceiling. "Was that so goddamn hard?"

"However --"

"Oh, fuuuuck." He wondered if he could strangle himself with the pillow. It was worth a try, right? He could ask Bruce, he'd know. Wait, asking Bruce wasn't worth a try. Ever. That would just be ... awkward. There'd be feelings. Tony was so tired of feelings.

"However," Loki said severely, "you must allow me to heal you. Including your heart."

"I must, must I?" as sour as he could manage, which was damn sour. "I'm sorry, why exactly do I have to let you take out stuff I'm coping just fine with? It's not broke, okay? Don't fix something that isn't broke." Tony squinted. "You know, you're this close to admitting you might not totally want me
dead. You might want to fix that."

"And if it were true?"

Tony lifted his head, eyes up as far as he could hike them. "Then I'd tell you to do it already."

He looked completely pole-axed. "You are incomprehensible!"

"Nope. See, the thing, I don't like people operating on me 'cause they think I might be useful later. I have problems with that word, I don't like that word. But if you're doing it because you actually want me to live a bit longer, and, you know, have a better chance at taking down the bad guys, I'm good with that."

"They are the same." Loki was stalking closer, and really, that was a magnificent frown, it was pretty cool actually he could fit in that many wrinkles on his forehead. It was kinda big anyway, but still. "The result is identical."

"Nope, big difference!" Tony said, and didn't actually bother getting up because, dude, crick in his neck. Shithead was like eight feet tall. "The difference is whether I punch you after. And if I ever speak to you again. And if I'd piss on you if you were on fire. Etcetera. I'm just saying, it matters to me. I don't actually care if it matters to you, it does to me, okay? I've had my fill of being somebody's tool. I've had it. I've just had it."

There was a long silence, but it was the awkward thinky busy kind of silence.

"I owe you a debt," Loki said eventually, something weird and hitching about the words. "I would repay it. Not so to suborn you to my debt in turn, but to give thanks. That I could be with my son ... there is very little you could not demand, if you but wished. This is all I can think would be equivalent."

"Okay," Tony said. "Okay, I get that. That's a lot better, and, you know, see, I can understand. I didn't do it so you'd heal me or anything, though, I just felt bad."

Loki came closer, wiping his face. He'd made the kid cry. Could he be any worse at this? Like, really? "Thus my debt weighs heavier still."

"Well, fine." Tony shifted, flexing his toes. "So how does this work? You put me out, right? I don't want to feel it, it'd hurt."

"Yes. I will do so now." Loki touched his leg, numb starting to seep, maybe some kind of anaesthetic.

"Hey, wait -- wait, what about afte --"


He still felt like himself. Everything was fine. Actually fine, like his skin was skin again and not just weird ooze.

Good. Okay. That was something.

Loki was standing at the foot of the bed, facing away, hands clasped behind his back. "It lasted but a breath," he said. "No more than that."
Tony glanced to the side and choked at the neat little pile of -- of shards, was what they were, and some of them were slivers and some were flakes of paint and some were as big as his thumbnail.

He recognised each and every one from the goddamn x-rays and scans and ultrasounds he'd memorised over the last few years, staring at pictures of his chest cavity all telling him the same damn thing, and trying to calculate how much time he had before they killed him anyway and somehow make it come out differently, come out so it didn't always get worse, because Yinsen was a genius and so was Tony but he couldn't fucking stop gravity.

And now they were just -- there, and they looked like, God, like they were just pencil shavings or something, and there was stringy white stuff next to them too. "What's this?"

"I removed scarring from your lungs and heart. It hindered my work."

"Oh." Tony stared at them, rubbing his chest and really, really not sure what to feel. He could feel the difference now, actually -- his fingers weren't as cold, there was more feeling in his toes. He could feel the air on them, even. His toenails weren't even blue at the bottom. It was a hell of a lot easier to breathe, like a weight had been taken off.

He hadn't realised how much he'd been straining against his own goddamn body until he didn't have to, and there was a lightness to it, sort of like vertigo but everything was more, not less. "Thanks. I meant it, though. We're not gods or whatever, but give us a chance, or something. Once we're up and running we're pretty good. Just ... you know, traction."

He turned around, something horribly bruised around his eyes. Tony realised he'd probably burned through most of his available magic fixing him up, and, yeah, he should probably do something about that, considering it was his fault. Five more percent brought Loki's shoulders down, and levelled out the swaying into something a bit more solid, even if he still looked like he'd fall if Tony pushed too hard. "Do you have enough? Traction?"

"Yeah. Yeah." He tapped his chest. "This definitely helps with the, uh, giving you a chance thing. Thanks for not killing me."

"I could not," Loki said. "You gave me my son."

There was, honestly, nothing Tony could say to that, because -- because -- because everything. "Well, now you're going to give me info, right? Research hours still going?"

"Until an enemy decides otherwise."

"Yeeeeeah, I'm not seeing anybody right now, are you? Come on then, Argue-Argue. Tell me about yourself. What's your favourite colour? What's up with the blue stick of destiny and how come it's so goddamn phallic? Why is your hair so greasy?"

"I think," slow and distinct, "of what you said, I still take most offense to the nickname. You may consider that to be an accomplishment."

Tony beamed and woke Jarvis, stretching and testing his new range of motion. Hot damn breathing felt good. "And I wasn't even trying!"
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

This is actually relevant to the plot, I swear.

Waking up to a SHIELD guard -- probably lieutenant by her soles, probably two years out from recruitment, had to fix her fucking shoulder tension or she'd set off that rifle on somebody didn't deserve it just by cramping wrong -- shuffling outside his room wasn't Clint's favourite way to start a shift.

There were worse, but he'd been dead to the world twelve hours straight and he still felt like his bones were too thin, his skull too small for the weight of Loki and the Tesseract.

"What's up, Lieutenant?"

If it'd been an emergency, he wouldn't have been woken up by shuffling, it'd have been Fury over his comm. If it'd been nothing urgent, he'd still be asleep.

"It's Director Fury, sir. Priority five-eight, sir. He says it's cold, sir."

Clint hauled on his boots and finished strapping in his gear, splashing his face and rinsing his mouth from the tap. Code 58 meant diplomacy and that Fury was being watched so closely he couldn't radio Clint, but he sure as fuck wanted to. 'Cold' meant 'it's Siberia up in here'.

He sent the Lieutenant on the way after telling her to file a complaint against the guy teaching her wrong and crawled into the ceiling, pulling himself through machine housing and little-used rooms until he had his bow drawn and ready above the briefing room.

What he hadn't expected to see, ever, was a blue-skinned giant thing completely dwarfing Fury, who had a beanie plastered over his head and a purple scarf thick around his neck. The rumble he'd heard wasn't taser readiness, it was its voice. It looked up at him, eyes red all the way from side to side, and gave the impression of waiting.

"Put it away and come on down, Agent," Fury said, and Clint dropped down on his feet into the intensely cold room, settling his bow into quickdraw.

"Sir." He nodded to the creature. "Evening."

Fury cleared his throat. "Agent, this is King Thrym of Jotunheim and friend of Laufey, the previous king and Loki's mother. Clint Barton, one of my best agents. He's my right-hand man. He'll help you as well as I can. Better, most of the time."

Even just being in the same room with it made him cold even through his gloves, the temperature around it dropping at least thirty degrees, and watching it talk -- it wasn't human. It just wasn't human. It had legs and arms and a loincloth, but it wasn't.

The Asgard peeps weren't either, but at least they carried themselves like people. They twitched, shifted, fidgeted, reacted. Thrym was just standing so still they were unreadable, and Clint couldn't tell where it'd attack, or if it even was going to or not.
"Useful. In these difficult ... times."

"Yeah. Agent Barton --"

"Scuse me, king sir or ma'am --"

"Neither," in tones of deep, deep amusement. "Address me ... as Thrym."

"King Thrym. How'd you get here?"

Fury nodded. "We were just coming to that. If you'd explain?"

"Laufey's son is the greatest sorcerer of the realms. Not the only. I walked paths between realms ... worlds ... though it wearied me."

Clint wondered if even with it so cold it was still hard for Thrym to talk, or if the pauses were interpretation lag or something; his mouth wasn't quite synched.

"We've had a lot of visitors recently," Fury said. "Most haven't been exactly friendly."

Again that deep rumble, like Thrym had to wind up to talk. Clint was leaning more and more toward a translation spell of some kind. "Yes. I come for my daughter. She is lost ... here ... and I could not before come with ... authority. Neither did I have ... reason to suspect I would be ... welcome, until I ... watched you treat with the ... kinslayer."

Clint took his cue from Fury's informality and hopped into a chair, balancing on the balls of his feet and avoiding touching the metal arms. "So the short of it is, you're here because we've been decent to Loki even though we know he's one of you and you think we can help you find our kid?"

"Yes. It has ..." Another rumble, like the spell was struggling, but Thrym's hand twitched and it levelled out. "Centuries of your years she was lost. I would find her."

He glanced at Fury, who nodded. So he was taking the lead. Okay, then. "I don't know anything off the top of my head, but I'm on a team with a lot of smart people, and between us we'll find out something. I'll ask them right now, if you've got a moment? They'll probably have questions."

There was a delay, Thrym watching him with the same eerieness, before a chuckle rolled up into Clint's feet. "Years."

Clint twitched a polite smile. "Shouldn't take that long," and he touched his comm. "Hey, guys, Avengers-Benders-Fenders. Anybody awake?"

"God, Barton, it's five am, you're like raptor Jesus. What do you want?"

"Stark, know anything about a frost giant missing somewhere on Earth? A girl. It'd be a while back."

"Uh ... where in the world's Carmen Frosty Sandiego's supposed to be? Hold on, Bruce's napping, Jarvis, make the channel just you and me and the hunk, okay? Okay. Juuuust us. Cosy threesome."

Hedging. He was definitely hedging.

Clint pulled up a map on the tablet, scaling it back a couple thousand years. "Do you remember where?"

Thrym considered it, then pointed a thick finger. Even just hovering made the tablet freeze up and die with a sad little crackly noise. RIP, tablet.
"Somewhere in Scandinavia," Clint reported. "You have anything that might match?"

"Would you kill me if I told you I had coordinates already?"

"Stark," Clint said, almost overbalancing, "what the fuck have you been up to?" He glanced up at Thrym; swearing in front of a Jotun king was probably bad form. "Uh, sorry. Look, Stark, it's important. Do you know anything or not?"

"Got a screen?"

"Yeah, in front of me." Clint swiped at it, waking and accessing the menus, and he watched files populate, marked as from the Strategic Scientific Reserve and definitely, definitely so classified they were above his head too, let alone Stark's. "How'd you find this?"

"Remember when I hacked SHIELD's security? I did some browsing. Looked up Steve. You know secret government agencies get up to creepy shit, right? This is some really, really creepy total shit."

But Fury was sighing over his shoulder like the breach was inevitable anyway, and Clint browsed a bit through gross medical details and records of an 'unidentified terrestrial', trying to think about how any of them would ever be able to tell Steve, ever, ever, ever, and fuck, Clint was probably going to be the one to do it, because that was just how shit rolled.

Then he found a picture. Jesus, they'd fucked her up, burns and all. Clint hated bearing bad news. But at least it had a clear shot of her face.

"Uh ... King Thrym. We've got a possible match, but some of us found her about eighty years ago and they didn't know what she was. Uh, they kept her prisoner, mostly asleep, and the place changed hands quite a lot. It hasn't been a good experience for her. She's -- she's in a bad way. It's not good. Um, we have a picture. Can you identify her from it?"

Thrym tilted their head, listening, then nodded in a movement so inexorable in its grace that it was like watching lava flow. Clint kind of got how they were king of a whole planet. "Show me."

He full-screened it and held it up. "This her?"

Thrym looked so long Clint's arms were starting to hurt when they lowered their head. "Yes. She is my kin. Do you ... hold this account, Fury-lord?"

"It was before my time as director of SHIELD. I didn't do any of that. I don't hold direct responsibility. But I'm in command of a man who benefited from her torture. That I'm sorry for."

"I ... accept." Thrym gazed at the picture again, and Clint knew where he'd seen that longing and anger before: Loki. Loki's pale, pointy face when Steve handed him proof of Jormungandr's heartbeat. "She lives. Take me ... to my daughter."

Fury stepped in. "Before we do anything about that, you haven't said anything about Loki. Do you have plans for him?"

Thrym twisted their head a perfect ninety degrees without moving a muscle below the neck, and the rumble was longer this time, double-toned like Thrym was struggling with the words, too. "Laufey-king was ... grieved by the theft of ... her third. That same child tricked their mother ... knowingly ... to her death. I would not speak to the kinslayer if it were the last Jotnar. To bestow punishment is ... more claim ... than my race will tolerate."

Okay, that was a fuck of a grudge. It just meant Loki was even more their problem, but they already
pretty much knew that.

Clint was still so, so, so glad they weren't on Thrym's bad side right now. He got the impression they could be as scary as the Hulk, and it'd be even worse because Thrym would be like that for a reason, and wouldn't stop until the reason was pulverised to a fucking smear, no quarter, no distractions.

Thrym stared down at Fury. "My ... child, Fury-lord."

"I'm getting the jet retrofitted to minus fifty," Stark said through the comm. "Like -- ten minutes. Hang on a bit, it's just me, I've only got two hands here. Everyone else's asleep or something."

Clint translated from Starkese. "We can't cross water by ourselves, so we have a transport we're getting ready for you. We're making it a bit colder than this room so you'll be more comfortable on the way over."

"I wait. Speak ... to me ... of my daughter's legacy. Tell me of those ... who took benefit ... from her agonies." It was very even, and very slow, but so heavy with condemnation Clint's skin crawled with danger.


"All you will say." Thrym lifted their chin, looking down at them from, literally, over their nose -- they were fifteen feet tall at least. "Speak."

"A scientist developed a serum from her cells," Fury said. "It was wartime. The serum was supposed to make super-soldiers out of ordinary people. Stronger, better, faster, smarter. There was only one successful result, and that's Captain Steve Rogers." Clint pulled up the obligatory before and after picture and held it up for Thrym.

Clint felt like he was Fury's powerpoint presentation or something, and he keyed up Banner's before and after picture once Thrym lifted a finger in what was probably a go-on-already gesture. "This is Bruce Banner, he's a scientist. He was trying to replicate the serum we used for Steve Rogers, but it didn't work out. He, well, he turns into this. We call him the Hulk."

Thrym stared for a long, long time.

"Are ... they aware? Are they ... worthy?"

"No," Fury said.

Clint kind of had to agree. Sure, the Hulk was great if you could point him, and Cap was a super-bulky sweetheart -- but ... worth it?

Worth this?

Nah.

"See it remains so. I would not have my daughter dishonoured ... by the gratitude or ... sorrow ... of your human race. 'Twere done, no more."

Fury nodded. "Understood, King Thrym."

"Ready!" Stark said. "God, their voice is deep. It's like an all-over vibrator or something. Hummina."

"Oh, my God, Stark," Clint hissed, "shut the fuck up." He cleared his throat and stood up in the chair
when Thrym's gaze swung back to him. "The transport's ready. People are going to panic if they see you, so if you could --?"

"I will not take Aesir skin. However..." And something happened, and Clint's eyes slid right over them. He knew they were there, he just couldn't look, like it was a temporary distortion in the air or something.

Clint was kind of impressed. "That works. This way."

Stark actually planned ahead really well -- the whole inside of the jet looked like one of those ice bars, carved out of a shitload of water, and it was colder than a brass bra. Clint had all of his Siberia gear on, trying to maintain warmth by eating a little bit here and there from the self-heating thermal cans of coffee and soup, and Thrym just half-sat, half-slept, it looked like he was sleeping, his eyes were closed, and kept waiting.

Getting to the research site was easy enough. Infiltrating and finding the storage and getting her box pulled up out of the deep-storage pits with rusty pulleys and not a little hope that nothing'd shifted in sixty years of disuse was harder, but in the end prying off the lids and digging through eight layers of chem-freeze under that implacable gaze was the easiest thing of all. Being stared at that like that made a lot of things suddenly easy.

Especially once Thrym got tired of waiting and just tore it apart, peeling back metal like it was magazine wrapping with their bare hands and a block nine feet by five skidded out across the floor, hissing as it started to melt. There was a frost giant in there, definitely, but she was packed in like a sardine, the stumps of her knees pushed to her chest and her elbows pushed against her ribs, hands crossed over her shoulders.

Thrym picked it up and shook her free, wiping clear her face and wrists, bits flaking and making Clint dash for a railing to avoid getting his feet burnt off, and she lolled against them with a tiny mewl like a dying kitten. She sounded shocked and scared, but she wasn't surprised. She'd been lying there for decades knowing someone would come for her.

It kind of put a whole new spin on 'oh, I found a baby abandoned in a temple', if they would, literally, wait as long as it goddamned took to get their kids back.

Watching Thrym wake up their burnt, blinded daughter and balance her on their arm while she tottered and sucked yellowy ice off Thrym's chest like she was nursing, the blue on her skin slowly starting to deepen from bright robin's-egg, was really, really, really damn difficult.

"I bear ..." low and deep enough to shake the floor, "you no goodwill. Nor do I bear ... hatred. Should you ... do this to any other Jotnar ... you all will answer to Jotunheim. I, King Thrym, swear it upon ... the heart of my realm. Once shall I stay the king's wrath. No more."

Clint bowed to them. What else was he going to do with an alien king with every reason to rip his head off? "Noted, King Thrym. For what it's worth? I'm sorry it happened."

"As I," Thrym rumbled. "Bear your shame. Take heed of kinslayer. The child was beloved ... of my beloved. I cannot act ... for Jotunheim. I may act ... for Laufey-king."

"I got it," the warning cramping cold down his legs. "Yeah. Yes. I understand. My team will take care of him, don't worry. I'll do my best to make sure you don't have to come back."

"You shall."

Clint bowed again, and when he looked up they were gone, the horrible chill fading, and he was
alone and suddenly sweating through three layers of clothes in a creepy ex-HYDRA lab in Vardø.

"Even if we're shit at it," Clint said to the air, and took a moment to laugh into his hands. He hated making promises. They never ended well.

"Stark?"

"Oh, hey, you're still alive, that's awesome. Not that I was worried or anything, I totally wasn't, I'd have a party if you got lost or something. What's up?"

Clint started scaling out of the lab. "You know you can't tell Cap. Or any of the others."

"Er, Romanova knows."

"Nah, she's fine. But everyone else. Especially Cap and Banner. Especially Loki. Not a word, Stark, I mean it."

A sigh. "What the fuck would I even say? I just can't do it."

He shouldered his way out of a vent and tip-toed over a bench, avoiding smashed test tubes and holding an oxygen mask over his face. "That's my job, Stark. You got yours, I got mine."

"Well, your job's shit. Ever considered a career change?"

Clint crawled out of a window and dropped to the ground, gasping at the shock of windchill. He turned in circles, squinting at the sky, then headed off back to the jet in the distance, huddling under his hood.

"After everything that's happened in the last few weeks? All the fucking time."
Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

Steve doesn't have everything right, of course. Nobody knows all the facts. Except maybe Fury, but that's Fury for you because he's awesome.

Steve had no idea what to make of whatever he was looking at.
"It's pretty?" he hazarded.

"It's a goddamn portal," Tony said, grinning around a mouthful of tiny screwdrivers. "The base mechanism, anyway. Because someone decided to get off their ass and help."

Loki rolled his eyes. "I aided previously."

"Liar," Tony crowed, but he was laughing and Steve made an alarmed noise and caught the screwdrivers before they could roll under the bench and jam the chairs.

Tony took the tent rebuilding as an opportunity to expand it, and now there was room for all of the Avengers plus the massed equipment plus Loki plus Doctor Selvig plus Tony's ego, always up to the task of filling the spaces left by Agents Romanova and Barton.

And now, put down between his and Loki's plates, their cups and salads pushed aside to make room, was a pretty little thing that quivered like it would get up and dance off the table if Steve looked away, sleek and seven-sided and very tiny for something so powerful, and Steve had a handful of spit-damp screwdrivers and nowhere to put them. "It'll work?"

"I'm thinking of sending a letter to Thor or something," Tony said. "'Hi, Point Break, come visit sometime, your folks are douchebags' and then trollface or something. Or, like, a card. We could totally make a card."

"Nyan," Banner said.

"Yes! Can we put glitter on its fingernails or something? Or, just, a lot of glitter. Like -- everywhere. Oh oh! We can put in a lego piece and make it fall out or something, and somebody'll step on it! We could fill it with glitter, even. We could fill a douchebag with glitter and put it in the lego and make it so it explodes if someone steps on it. That'd totally work."

"I like it," Banner said, much too cheerful. "Rainbow coloured, right?"

"Totally rainbows."

Steve puzzled through the conversation for a moment, then gave up. "Is this one of those 'meme' things?"

Tony leaned across the table and Steve caught the pencil before he could be tapped with it, a little disturbed at how fervently wide-eyed Tony was. "You have never stepped on a lego block, Steve. It's a childrens' toy and it exists to ruin lives at three in the morning in the dark on the way to the toilet. Be glad. Be grateful."
Steve blinked. "I ... can't tell if you're serious."

"Oh, he is," Banner said. "They ... they hurt a lot, actually."

"Yup." Tony served himself and sat down next to Loki, bumping elbows and whining until Loki hissed and gave him the croutons he'd picked out of the salad and piled up on the edge of his plate.

Steve watched Tony slip Loki his olive slices, Loki seeming not to notice until Tony was finished, at which point he stirred them into his pasta, with no little bemusement. "You get on better now."

"Were you aware Loki might not actually be a complete and total dickbag? I know, I was surprised too."

The god in question rolled his eyes at Steve, sighing in a way Steve was very, very familiar with. It was the sigh Steve ended up using a lot when Tony talked just a little bit more than was wise. "I settled a debt."

"You did more than that, big fella." Tony stole Steve's croutons, too, and Steve resigned himself to pretending Tony had any idea what stealth meant. "He took the shrapnel out of me. And! He fixed up my lungs. I have like eighty-nine percent lung capacity now, it's great."

Steve couldn't help staring, both for the implications of what Tony was saying (eighty-nine percent was an improvement?) and of Loki doing something so uncharacteristic. "You saved him for a debt? That's ... years of life. Decades."

"A debt," Loki said flatly. "I'd prefer not to say more."

"It's because I'm awesome." He preened. "But we knew that, because portal, hello. Hi, portal, aren't you cute." Tony blew the hedrahedron kisses. "Who's a little cutie? Daddy's here."

Loki poured himself tea, lip curling. "You are a disgrace."

"Shh, Argue-Argue, I'm bonding. You wanna know how it works, Steve? And no, we're not feeding it to the Hulk, shut up, Brucie. We use this instead of the Tesseract. We've got a special frame and everything, I cribbed it off the Tesseract jar. We just have to power it up. If it explodes I can just improve it on the next go-around, but we should have like ... twenty seconds of activating it before there's a chance that happens, and it's not like portalling takes forever."

Selvig reached between them and yanked it off the table with a pair of tongs. "What he isn't telling you is that it's still severely unstable."

Tony was making very unconvincing tragic faces. "It's cute! It was perfectly happy right there, put it back, I was having a moment."

"Selvig's, uh, got a point, so ..."

"It's great that we have it, you've done great work, but what can we do with it?" Steve said. "We have a portal, but to where? Will we send him a letter?"

"You will not need to," Loki said, very dry, tipping his back his head to finish his mug. His adam's apple was much less prominent these days and Steve was glad to see it. Loki never asked for food but he never refused it, either. "He will soon arrive of his own accord."

"So, uh, if that's true, how come you're not worried?" Banner said, and Steve paused in readying his shield to take a proper look at Loki.
Loki, who was bright-eyed and calm and slowly filling out into someone much, much less haunted-looking and nonchalantly pouring Steve another cup of tea. He looked very princely, somehow.

It was very easy to recognise him as the same person who'd done all those things in New York and Steve didn't know how he felt about the current state of affairs. Confused that apparently Tony had forgotten. Wary of him being in the tent even with Banner right there and the platoon of soldiers inside and around the tent. Uncomfortable that it was still so obvious that Loki wasn't right in the head, and rather murderous, and a little to be pitied. Steve once expected people to look different after they did terrible things. Once.

He'd learned they never did look different. Oh, if they regretted it. But Loki didn't. That was clear as the sun.

"No doubt Frigga told him of the imminent threat and he decided to intercept it. Harming me would rather defeat his virtuous purpose. One cannot punish one if one is deceased."

"He wants to be your brother, he wants to be the mighty Thor, and if he's binding himself to to protecting you this enemy can't touch you," he said, almost admiring Loki's manipulation. "He can't let anyone touch you, because that would mean he lied. You planned this."

Loki leaned across the table and took one of Steve's tomato slices with a neat little pincer of his fingers. "Naturally. He is quite predictable."

Tony put his head in his hands. "And you hammed it up to your mum so she'd promise to protect you. That means Thor, right?"

"Mhm."

"So if he hurts you, or if you get hurt, he'll have lied to his mum and we all know how Thor feels about that, and of course she's so worried and motherly she'll have played her part to the hilt and made him promise extra hard." Tony moaned into his palms. "You are such a manipulative little shitbag. Why? I -- I'm actually curious here, why? Were you worried?"

Loki sneered. "I would never worry for Thor. The man is an oaf and a braggart. One simply takes him at his word and the rest follows."

"I think he meant more, uh, about us."

The glower became fearsome. "Absolutely not."

"So I guess we're not, uh, puny mortals with no chance against these guys," Banner said, smiling.

"Of course you are." He opened his mouth again, then closed it and visibly fumed. "Enough."

Tony put an arm around Loki's shoulders, dragging him close and ignoring the fearsome glare. "It's okay if you like me, everybody likes me, I'm too awesome not to like. But seriously. You are so full of shit. I'm just telling you so you know, because I know, and you know, that you mean to use our portal to send him back. Right? Right? Warm? Sizzling?"

Loki pincered Tony's thumb and very deliberately lifted his hand off his shoulder, dropping it backwards. "You," sneering, "are one to talk of hypocrisy."

"Exactly, birds of a feather flock together. Look, it's nice that Thor's coming back, that hammer will seriously, seriously help, but -- come on, be honest here, just a little bit, are you okay with this?" Tony looked around all of them. "Hell. Are we okay with this?"
Steve ... didn't know.

The time without Thor and getting to know Loki a little better helped him form some conclusions and made him doubt others.

Thor loved Loki. Truly. Dearly. It was obvious to Steve. And on that love there was, probably always was, a but pinned for Loki to read over and over. It wasn't the love that was conditional -- that was unstinting. It was the lack of disappointment.

Steve tried to imagine what it would be like to be the reflexive 'but' to Thor's fellow-feeling. To watch Thor be thoughtlessly good-natured to everyone but. To be an afterthought -- but of course you will come, but of course you can stay, but of you are my brother.

Once he'd have guessed Thor was doing it on purpose, but the longer Thor was away the less condemnatory Loki was whenever he was mentioned. He'd even brought him up to Steve without prompting more than once, and when he did he sounded more much more resigned than angry. It almost came across as though he was asking Steve to understand Thor's measure.

He'd struck Steve as a very generous person, almost gregarious, especially when they'd fought together. Of course Steve had to prove himself -- he remembered doing it over and over back in the army for similar reasons -- but once he did Thor hadn't held back coordinating their attacks, and he'd taken Steve's direction without question or hesitation. He'd treated them well, and all of that was despite everything he'd said Asgard thought about humans. And he was the crown prince of Asgard, and under tremendous pressure to uphold all those things. He was a dignitary visiting what amounted to his least important colony, for heaven's sake.

It said a lot for his basic nature that he'd treated them as people first and mortals second. But the fact that those things were separate from one another said worse things about how he'd been raised.

He did understand, a little, about why, and how, and the way the need for someone to be sure they were doing the right thing crystallised under pressure. Thor was in the position of having to punch fake Hitlers every day, every year, every minute, just to tread water. He wasn't reading propaganda off notecards taped to the back of his fake shield for an audience too eager to believe in him to notice when he stumbled -- it was burned into his mind and his entire life.

Thor wasn't stepping on a choreographed stage, he was living it, always under heatlamps, always waiting for a break just to get a mouthful of water, always aware that if he tripped it reflected on Asgard and on a father Steve doubted Thor believed he could live up to because he was his father and he was the king and above all he was the All-Father. There was only one All-Father, and Thor would never, ever be it.

And he was still generous enough, kind-hearted enough, to help Steve up when he'd had the wind knocked out of him.

Steve had the suspicion most Asgardians would've just left him there. Some probably wouldn't have even bothered to notice because he was human, and mortal, and weaker, and saving someone from an inevitable death was never, ever a kindness, even if help might've meant they lived to fight again, because it was on your own or not at all and you had to fight alone to die an honourable death. That was the logic, wasn't it?

And still, still, still, Thor had given him his hand and smiled at him.

There was a lot to work with. Thor had so much potential to be a good person. There was just ... so much in the way. So, so much.
But being near their parents would just bury it all again. That was Steve's decider.

"I'm okay with it," Steve said. "I'm going to have to order supervised visits with Loki, though. Sorry," he said to Loki. "I just don't see it not getting out of hand, and I'd really like someone to be there to make sure neither of you get hurt."

Loki shrugged. "As you wish."

"I want him to think about shit before he says it," Tony said. "I mean, that's basically -- this guy here overthinks waaaaaaay too much and gets offensive, and Thor thinks, like, not at all and gets offensive. Can't we balance them out or something? Bit of this, bit of that?"

"Oh, I bid thee well in your endeavour," Loki murmured.

Tony glared. "You have like ... zero faith. It's annoying. Have I told you that? It's annoying."

"What about Jane?" Selvig said.

"Oh, shitballs," Banner said, then coughed. "I didn't actually -- uh, that -- sorry. I mean, this is a bad thing."

"I knew you had it in you," Tony said.

"She isn't coming, is she?" Steve said. Jane Foster. Thor's ... girlfriend? Were they going steady? Steve didn't know if Thor had seen her at all. "It's dangerous."

"No," Selvig said, very tired. "She just asks about him."

Tony reached back to pat his arm. "Sorry, dude. That's harsh. What do you even say to her?"

"Small talk. What can I say?" He wiped grease off his hands. "Your boyfriend's an alien?"

"Best that she forget. That is what you can say."

Selvig was giving Loki a long, long look. "You're sure about that."

Loki shrugged. "It will be chance, should they meet again. She is mortal. Her time is past."

"So ... summer romance? You could spin it that way. It's better than the other guy," Banner said. "But, uh, I see what you mean. We're having him back?"

"Looks like it," Steve said. "With conditions. I'll talk to Fury about it."

"You might want to look not so much like you're sucking lemons when you say that," Tony advised. "He loves us, really, you're his favourite."

Steve tried to push away some of the unenthusiasm. He respected Director Fury; he had a hard row to hoe, and Steve believed he was doing his best. They simply disagreed on how to go about it. Very, very strongly disagreed.

Loki was giving the roof of the tent sly, anticipatory glances. "You may wish to speak to him immediately."

Steve blinked. "What? He's coming?"

Thunder cracked the sky.
"I believe I am meant to be in my cell," he murmured with a gloating little chuckle.

"Be right back, you guys, come on, no arguing, Argue-Argue --" Tony yanked at Loki's arm. "Come on -- oh, shit, I have to -- looks suspicious if there's more than one of us --"

"I'll do it," Banner said. "You don't need me for this part. So, uh," between blasts of thunder. "Either you come with me, or I'll bring out the other guy, and, uh, drag you, and I'd like to avoid that, so ..."

"There will be no such indignities to my person regardless," Loki sniffed, but he drained his mug, plucked another slice of tomato from Steve's plate, and followed Banner at a lope.

"This is going to end so badly, we know that, right? Don't we? We totally do, we happy few, we band of ... Avengers," Tony said, giving an exaggerated wince as more thunder rolled and lightning briefly lit above their heads. "That just doesn't sound right, I'm not made for Shakespeare. I hope he stops that shit soon, it's fucking up my readings."

"I hope Doctor Banner will be all right with Thor," Steve said.

He wasn't sure about that either. He wasn't sure about a lot of things.

"I guess if he isn't the Hulk will tell us. Come hold this, daddypoo. Steve, grab the other side, lean on it a bit. Let's get some work done."
Discussion of prostitution, coercion, misunderstandings, sibling rivalry, child abuse, slavery, cruelty, other fun things.

Bruce wasn't bothering to pretend he was doing anything but waiting for Thor. He hadn't remembered a tablet or a book, but the chair was still there and he had his glasses. Small mercies.

Mostly he watched Loki pace inside the cell, his turns more and more agitated with every minute that passed, and even the rumble of Jormungandr's heart through the earpiece Bruce jerry-rigged off a guard's spare wasn't helping.

The thunder stopped a while ago.

Bruce figured Thor was talking to Fury, getting the bracelets and clothes explained, the terms and conditions, but in the meantime everything was tense and Bruce was ... simmering, was a good word.

If Thor fucked up, Bruce probably would Hulk and not feel all that bad about it.

Listening to Tony talk was one thing -- Tony was the oldest of them, and despite everything he'd still had the most time to get used to crap. Bruce believed him when he talked about his life, when they found strange, specific connections across their very, very different generalities, and he'd freely admit he didn't really ever have anyone he was raised to be that close to, or a relationship where that kind of codependence was likely. That twisting of a sibling wasn't something he knew, the way Tony didn't know how it felt to borrow staplers at school to fix his shoes because all the money was in his dad's booze.

Different strokes, and even with all the similarities they still had to tell each other.

But Loki didn't even have to talk. All Bruce had to do was watch.

Loki stopped pacing, whirling to face front, and folded his arms, everything about him closing in and down, and actually, it was weird to see him go unreadable when he had so much face the rest of the time.

Bruce settled a little more obtrusively in the chair, feet deliberately in the way of the door. If Thor wanted to get in, he'd have to do it over Bruce. And the guards. And the other guy.

It was nice to agree with the Hulk about something.

Thor was staring at Loki from the end of the gangway like he didn't recognise him, and -- actually, yeah, Bruce could see that. The clothes fit very differently now that Loki was eating and sleeping, and he carried himself with a lot less grandstanding. It wasn't totally gone -- it was Loki, and he was a teenage alien prince, grandstanding was baseline -- but it was less calculated to intimidate everyone around him.

"Brother," Thor said, and he looked tired, Mjolnir swinging from the leather strap around his wrist,
not the handle, like he couldn't trust his fingers to hold it. He looked beat-up by Thor standards, a slash healing across his face and knuckles bruised. There was even a dent in his bracers. "Doctor Banner."

"Hey. Other guy look worse?"

That got him a half-smile, more rueful than he'd thought Thor was capable of. "Something like."

Loki lifted his chin, very collected. "Thor. What have you done?"

Thor looked away, shifting Mjolnir from hand to hand. "I know not, brother. What is it I have done? You always knew when I did another foolish thing. Will you tell me?"

He closed his eyes like it pained him, arms gone so tight around himself the seams of his shirt were straining. "Heimdall is sworn to Odin, you fool."

"Ah, brother, you are not wrong. He is. Hogun is not. Did you know that?" Thor paced closer. "Did you know he can speak freely?"

"A suspicion. Nothing more. None are so grim as truthkeepers." Loki looked confused, half-stepping back. "What have you done? Hogun bears no love for me."

"No," Thor said quietly, "yet it is more than he has for me. I asked in his chambers, and when that was not enough and he yet would not speak, I demanded, I invoked all the power of the throne of Asgard. Yet he did not speak, and faced no guards, no whispering compulsion. I fell to my knees, then. I begged my friend to speak to me of truth, if he would but choose to do so. He refused, and we fought. I bared my throat for his blade."

Loki's face was a mix of grief and horrified disbelief, and Bruce watched warily, glancing between them. "A prince should not do such things. A prince should not act such. Do not say you debased yourself for a monst--"

Thor interrupted with a chuckle. "A friend does so for a friend, when he is in need. Am I not a friend too, brother? Were we not friends?"

"Once," Loki said. "I hardly recall it."

Thor winced, opened his mouth, but closed it and said nothing, head bent to watch his bloodied hands.

"What are you about?"

"Is it true, brother, you served as concubine that time we hunted in Svartalfheim?"

Ohhhhh, no, no, Bruce was not hearing this. He pinched his nose under his glasses, shaking his head. This was a terrible, terrible idea, he knew it.

"No," Loki said, but even to Bruce's shitty eyesight he was shaking. "He has lied to you. I am not surprised your friends cast me in such an unflattering light, they have ever thought little of me--"

"I do not recall it, brother," Thor said. "You told me in my delirium that we would be safe, if I but trusted you. I did, and we were free. That is all I know. How much don't I know?"

Loki twitched, hunching on himself, twisting almost as though he could hide behind his own shoulders if he tried hard enough. "Much. You," he hissed, "are misinformed."
"And you are ever incapable of sincerity." Thor sighed and looked up at the ceiling, biting his lip. "Could you not have fought?"

He flinched like he'd been scalded. "To what end, brother? If you will recall, you were poisoned by a blade and so ill it was not entirely impossible you would die before I --"

"Before what?" Thor said softly. "Before you succeeded? Before you brought medicines, and pressed them to my wounds, and spoke to me of home? I was in the chamber, brother; I remember tiles, and the wrought silver of their cabinets. I heard your cries. I thought it was delirium. Was it?"

"You ever seek to humiliate me," Loki whispered. "I apologise I could not perform to your exacting, brutish, warrior standards, I apologise I could not take up their mace and slay them for fear of your weakness, I apologise I am unworthy of your beloved battles, shall I grovel now as an unspeakable might, shall I bare my whorish breast for your blade --"

"Thank you."

Loki abruptly pressed himself against the opposite wall of the cell, wide-eyed and his entire body one long cringe. "What?"

"Oh, my brother. How difficult this." Thor cleared his throat, still staring at his hands, and he touched his knuckles, rubbing blood between finger and thumb. "I should not have ventured so far into their realm. I should not have told you it was on your head if I was not hale on our return. I should not have told you I would allow you to be part of the three if you accompanied me to my satisfaction. That is why, is it not? I am," voice cracking, "so very sorry."

"You know nothing," Loki said, white-faced with anger, so wild-eyed Bruce honestly thought if there wasn't the wall in the way he'd have already clawed Thor's eyes out. "You know nothing at all of regret, do not pretend it now. My heart has no softness for you, do you hear me? None at all. You are but a witless worm writhing at my feet, and that is as it should be. That is all you will ever be. I have no need of your wailing sentiment."

"Tony's right, isn't he? You really like w nouns," Bruce said without really thinking, and winced when both of their attention lasered onto him. "Uh, just ... an observation."

Loki was staring at him, and it made it easy to see he was holding back tears. It was also easy to see he was coiling back into himself, and the way he looked at Bruce -- it was like he was doing it for his benefit, like he could tell how close Bruce was to letting out the other guy.

Bruce was both very creeped out and a little touched.

"Thor," sighing the name. "What are you doing here?"

"Mother said you were in danger. I felt I should come. It will be soon, won't it? The ones who twisted your mind?"

"There was little more they could do," Loki snapped. "You are tiresome enough."

Thor grinned, biting his lips together when it looked like Loki was going to go for his throat. "You are more yourself than you have been in centuries, brother."

Loki shrugged and started to pace, hands twitching like a jaguar's tail. "Presumably a consequence of your blessed absence."

"Oh, brother," and he sounded wounded, but also relieved, and Bruce saw him swallow back tears.
"I am unforgiveable, am I not?"

"Yes." Loki turned back, glancing at Thor before watching himself pick at his hands. "You are."

They exactly mirrored each other, from the angle of their heads to the hunch of their shoulders to the position of their hands to the order they cleaned under their fingers.

"Father and Mother, too?" very quiet.

Loki nodded, but didn't look up, and they both industriously ran their little fingers under their thumbnails. "Yes."

"Did you know Laufey was ... your --?"

"Yes. You are exactly aware of my parentage?" Loki sounded surprised. "I hadn't thought Odin would go that far."

It was Thor's turn to nod. "You were always a prince, brother. Always born to be a king. Your bloodline was not your lack."

"Madness and unmanliness," Loki said, softer and softer as he went on, "were always my flaw."

"I am not sure, brother. Not now." Thor flexed his hands, examining his fingernails, and Loki unconsciously copied him. It wasn't even copying -- they were too synchronised for that. "Now I doubt a great many things. But not that I love you. Never that."

"I ... know. What I said, before your coronation -- I was sincere. It's still true. If you wish to keep such sentiment."

"I do. Thank you. Again." There was a long, awkward silence. "How did Hogun know and not I?"

"What would I have said, Thor, of what a true warrior would not do? You are so --" A sigh. "So obtuse. I didn't want you to know. What did you say? You didn't only ask with your throat."

"I asked him to tell me when else I had been wrong beyond recall. He is literal, as you know."

"Your wrongs are a greater list than I have breath to recount. I will not exhaust myself so for your self-flagellation," Loki said.

Thor smiled. "I would not ask, brother."

"See it remains so."

It was a long time before they simultaneously sighed, lowered their hands and looked at one another again, the shift into enmity obvious in the break of their similarity, how Thor straightened his shoulders and Loki shifted his feet. "What is it you do?" much softer.

"I thought to see my companions if they would receive me. I thought to protect you. I thought to tell you I have ... thought, a little. I am not so oafish as you claim, brother."

Loki spread his hands, turning away in obvious dismissal. "Delude yourself as you will."

Thor braced himself as though taking a great weight, and turned to Bruce. "How have you fared, then?"

Bruce was aware of Loki sitting on the mattress, hands folded in his lap and watching them. "Not ...
too badly, actually. Uh, we finished a portal."

He looked very, very conflicted. "That is ... impressive."

"You're, uh, you're not going to pry it out of Tony's hands, are you? Because that'll happen, uh, never."

"Not as I know, as I have not ... spoken of it, and thus have not been commanded to do so. I do not wish to."

Loki snorted. "Omissions, Thor? What next? Soon you may lie. What then?"

Thor flinched and pointed Mjolnir at Loki. "I will not. Silence your forked tongue."

He rolled his eyes and picked up one of the well-thumbed books, apparently deciding to ignore them.

Bruce tried to navigate the fact that he'd never actually talked to Thor on his own before. It was awkward. Very awkward. "Well, uh, that's ... encouraging. Uh, we were thinking -- sending you back, with it? So ... not destroying it would be great. That would get, uh, messy."

Thor looked relieved. "I have not been allowed the Tesseract; my mother has bid her claim to it. I thought -- that is glad news."

"You thought you wouldn't go back?" Bruce said, raising an eyebrow.

"Of course I would," Thor said easily. "But if it were a day, or thirteen of your years, it matters little. I have more immediate concerns."

That was one of the most unsubtle are-you-watching-me-talk-about-you side glances Bruce had ever, ever, ever seen.

Loki studiously ignored him.

"That's ... good," Bruce said, aware that he now officially failed at social relations forever. "So, uh, do you think you can deal with this Chitauri guy?"

Thor lifted an eyebrow and held up Mjolnir, twitching a little you-silly-mortals smile. "Yes."

"Yeah, I... knew that." Bruce fidgeted and decided he might as well bite the elephant in the room. "Uh, what do you want out of the whole ... Loki and you thing? You know, it's a bit awkward."

"I wish him home," Thor said. "I also wish him well."

Bruce couldn't help laughing a little. "That's, uh, a bit of a contradiction. Sorry. We've been getting to know him a little, and -- yeah."

"So I am beginning to realise," Thor said sadly. "I did not know how little I knew. I thought he would speak to me of his concerns, as I spoke to him of mine."

Oh, that was just so -- it was classic, really, and Bruce couldn't help half-laughing.

"You're just like that, aren't you?" Off his puzzled look, he elaborated, "you feel better when you talk to people about your problems." "Yes, of course. My friends are very wise. If insistent," and Thor touched his knuckles again, face darkening. "When it is needed."
"I'm guessing he, uh, doesn't feel better talking to people," Bruce said, shrugging a shoulder at Loki. "I could be wrong, though."

"I ..." Thor hesitated. "How can that be? It is friendship, to speak of troubles, and ask after them so they can be told. To speak of it is to be close. Isn't that so, brother?"

Loki sighed, very weary. "Must you always ask questions for which you know the answer?"

"It seems I must," Thor said, and sighed with the exact same tone. "Why do you not tell me of your hurt?"

"You were oft its architect," Loki said. "Why should I? Why should I wish closeness with anyone in Asgard?"

Thor grumbled. "As you tell me so often I am an ignorant oaf. In one breath you expect more of me than any other, and in the next you expect less of me than your chamber slave whom you refuse the luxury of clearing your messes. I know not of your wishes. What can I do but fall upon them?"

Even if they were adopted and hated each other, or at least they did a damn good job of rubbing each other the wrong way, it was pretty obvious to Bruce that they'd grown up together.

Wait, slaves?

"You guys have slaves?"

Thor half-turned back to him. "Of course. Do you not?"

"Not ... in this country. Usually." Bruce grimaced. He couldn't actually say no. He wished he could. "Uh, it's -- illegal, we banned it a while ago. Uh, people who traffic slaves aren't ... we don't like them very much. We try to stop them, you know, give people a better life."

Loki cleared his throat. "They are spoils of war, Doctor Banner." He turned a page. "Though they remain slaves without pretensions of royalty."

Thor was frowning now. "That was never our father's intention."

"Was it not? Does he tell you of his intentions, then? Does he whisper in your mind of the golden realm of Asgard, knowing no wrongs, only misunderstandings?"

"Never like you, brother. You spoke wickedness into the ears of your slaves, and frightened them with the snakes you placed in their bed. It were not well you were so cruel."

Loki rolled his eyes. "If they wouldn't move my work while I learned my craft I wouldn't have cause for displeasure, would I?"

"He was forbidden slaves in his hundredth year," Thor told Bruce, turning back to him. "After he frightened one so completely they shat themselves running to what they thought was freedom. 'Twere a Bilchstem's cage."

Bruce stared. Steve had told them over dinner about that conversation. "Wow, I thought I was mean."

Loki hummed. "I told you, all of you, time and again and none of you heard my objections. I did as I must. The slave did not die," he told Bruce, very dismissive. "He was merely terrified."

"Merely!" Thor cried. "Merely, you say. He trembled in the healing halls for a month until our
mother administered him her tinctures. You go too far, brother, and speak of poison until we would choke on it."

"If there is no alternative."

Thor growled. "There is always alternative."

Loki calmly turned a page. "Is there?"

He rubbed his forehead, shaking his head and generally very put-upon, and Bruce again had the unwelcome experience of Thor's full attention. "Are our companions here? I would speak with them."

"Uh, yeah, they're all here. Uh, if you want to talk to Tony and Steve, maybe Agent Barton, they're probably in the experiment tent. Uh, one of the guards can take you?"

One silently detached themselves from their formation around the cell with a nod. "Uh, follow that guy."

"Thank you." Thor glanced back at his brother, obviously wishing he could say something, but padded after the guard.

The other ones reshuffled their positions a little, and Loki put down the book and got up to pace, arms folded again.

"So that ... went well," Bruce said.

Loki shook his head, turning on his heel just before his face would've smacked into the glass and pacing across again. "He was never to know of such things. I do not understand Hogun's reasoning."

Bruce could think of a few. "Maybe he was worried about you."

"Hogun? Never. He worries as Thor reflects."

"You know, I, uh, we might've been watching a different conversation?" He did kind of have to give Thor props for actually talking about it -- it was hard for Bruce to deal with hearing about it, and he wasn't even the one Loki had done it for. Not that Bruce didn't know what it was like to scare Loki that badly, but still.

Loki threw up his hands. "I do not know. I am unsatisfied. I did not expect --" His chin trembled, and Bruce looked away uncomfortably at his shuddering gasp, the way he twisted his fingers over his mouth. "I do not know what I expected."

"There's a lot of that going around," Bruce said, and tried not to hear him cry.
The Avengers were so much more trouble than they were worth. It never took her very long to come to that conclusion, but it surprised her how often and how intensely.

As a PR stunt, they were beautiful.

As a team, they were a disaster.

But she was the sort of person who enjoyed disaster movies (if mostly because Clint would get so caught up in critiquing civilian idiocy that he fell asleep in disgust) and she wasn't unfamiliar with being in the middle of one.

Peeling oranges at a table in a tent full of very expensive equipment surrounded by the rest of the Avengers chowing down on dinner while Thor stormed and yelled outside and Selvig tried to calm him down definitely counted as one of the times she came to that unshakeable, eternal conclusion. Disaster. Completely.

Clint was pretending to be asleep on her shoulder, probably to avoid running out of the tent and giving Thor a piece of his mind, and she listened to Thor rage on and on about the glove and the portal and the strangeness of mortals and lying, thieving little brothers, fed Clint peeled segments, and wondered if she should be more perturbed. Probably.

She should, in all likelihood, be out there assisting Selvig. But she had no guarantee Thor would listen any better to Selvig with her input and frankly she was still too disturbed by Clint's report of what happened with King Thrym to be as fair to Thor as the role would require her to be. That she could invariably do it was irrelevant; it wasn't the doing, it was the selling.

Right now she would find it terribly difficult to sell guns to the Ten Rings (currently desperate for weaponry) without pausing to swig vodka and lecture them on the most efficient way to exercise familial bonds on children you were planning to kill later. Natasha doubted that would go down well. Fury also doubted it when she told him, so officially and unofficially he had her and Clint back on off-mission cat-herding duties. It wasn't all that much of a stress reduction given the fact that she was essentially trying to sandpaper and glue the edges of seven disparate pieces while strongly encouraging them to attach to each other, but it let her do enough work to sleep and not so much that she couldn't.

Selvig came back in while she was demolishing a second orange, rubbing his face and cursing. Thor was making inarticulate noises outside. "I wish there was a bar."
"I am a bar," Stark said, and produced rum. "Order up."

"I'd rather beer, if you've got any?"

Stark pointed over his head. "Fridge there. Bring one for me too. Anyone else want one?"

"Me," the table chorused, Natasha included, and a six-pack was distributed.

"Sometimes I can't figure out if your alcoholicism is rubbing off on us or if we just constantly need a goddamn drink," Clint said to Stark, opening his bottle and tilting it at a strange angle so he didn't have to take his head off her shoulder.

"I like the taste," Cap said.

"I'm fashionable," Stark said, waggling his eyebrows.

"You're generous," Selvig said, setting down his bottle with a sigh. "Thanks, son."

" Didn't, uh, go all that well?" Banner said. He'd come down after Thor and Selvig already started shouting, taking a place at the table and silently working his way through a pomegranate one seed at a time, and when they asked he'd said something about mixed feelings and they'd understand when Thor calmed down.

"Turns out it's very important, absolutely priceless, with the power to manipulate everything in the universe pretty much all at once, and it's supposed to be in Asgard's treasury for, ah, safekeeping."

"That little shit gave me something priceless," Stark beamed. "I love priceless gifts, they're adorable. Great paperweights. The power to control the universe, really?"

"Supposedly it's the 'Infinity Gauntlet.'" Selvig opened another bottle of beer from the second sixpack condensing on the table. "The gems control different aspects of the universe."

"Sounds like a B-movie villain," Clint said.

"Shouldn't we be more, uh, excited about this? I mean ... infinite power?"

Natasha contemplated her beer and the pile of orange peel in the descending silence. Thor had shut up at some point; she hoped she wouldn't have to fetch him.

"I just kind of want to go home and go back to normal, actually," Stark said thoughtfully. "It's nice saving the world, don't get me wrong, it's awesome, but ..."

Cap shrugged. "Infinite power is a lot of responsibility. I don't think anyone can really be trusted with that. Can they?"

"And it's butt-ugly," Clint said, taking a swallow.

"That too," Stark said, nodding. "I wouldn't be caught dead in that, and I've been caught in a lot. There's videos. Most of them I'm naked, but sometimes I'm wearing things. Usually on my head, but, you know, the thought's there."

"We don't need to hear about your exhibitionistic tendencies, Stark," she said.

He frowned at her. "Come on, I bet you saw the videos when you read up to me for your spy-slash-assistant-slash-hot-model role."
Natasha nodded very slowly. "Exactly."

Clint sniggered against her and Stark rolled his eyes, but even Cap was smiling.

"But, you know, where do we put it?" Banner poured a shot of rum into his beer bottle and shook it with his thumb sealing the mouth. "I mean, I don't like giving it to Asgard. That's, uh, that's a bad plan."

"It relies on the gems," Selvig said. "The glove is just a conduit."

"So we just have to take them out?" Clint glanced up at her. "We're good at stashing shit."

"Thor said there's one in Loki's spear. The mind gem, apparently. I'm sure you can guess what it does."

"Fuck," Stark said succinctly. "Can anybody just, like, touch it and use it, or does it have to be in something? I mean, if it needs Loki to push it through the tip of the stick of destiny, that means we probably can't."

Banner cleared his throat. "It controlled us okay before. That was, uh, that was a terrible first impression, wasn't it."

She watched the table share a mutual cringe. "Uh, yeah. We were douchebags," Stark said to Selvig. "Total douchebags. We were like two seconds from killing each other just to make them shut up."

Thor opened the tent flap and the table went quiet again.

Natasha did her job and waved him inside. "Have a seat."

"Have a boilermaker," Selvig said, pushing it to the empty seat next to him. "Think you could use one too."

"Yes," Thor said, voice deeper than she remembered, and he let it fall behind him, putting Mjolnir in a corner and making the seat creak when he sat. "I thank you."

Natasha wasn't nice enough to break the awkward silence, though.

"So, uh, Thor," Stark said brightly, "how'd the family meeting go? Hugs and manly backslapping and we're just all misunderstanding everything? Because that'd be great, really, that'd be awesome."

"No," Thor said, very soft. "I wish you were entirely wrong, but no."

"What, uh, exactly ... happened? I heard you talked to your friends, which, you know, is a good thing, but uh ..."

Clint reached for her orange and she let him take it. "I guess he wasn't any nicer to you than some random stranger coming up and asking really personal questions, huh?"

Thor blinked at him. "Yes," after a moment. "It was very much like that. How do you know of such things?"

Natasha could explain this one. "Personal experience."

"Normal people don't turn into superheroes," Stark said, touching the reactor. "You kind of have to be pretty fucking up to be any good at it, actually. The personality traits overlap between, you know, shitty parents and superhero. Either you're trying to please people who can't be pleased or you're ..."
trying to please people who can't be pleased." He made a face. "Or what she said."

"Superheroes are vigilantes in costume, basically," Clint said. "It's kind of a legal grey area. Vigilantes generally don't get that way without a lot of reasons."

"Or just one works," Banner said. "I'm just an accident, but, uh, the other guy is ... a hell of a push. My dad didn't like me either."

Stark and Banner shared significant looks before Stark turned back to Thor. "We just know, okay? Between all of us, we've got ... one functioning parental figure, if Steve's right about his mum. There's like eight million kinds of fuckup in this room. We know how this shit works."

"Then you can advise me," Thor said, frowning. "I know not what to think. My father is great. I know this. My brother has long thwarted his happiness. But -- I wonder --" He broke off, sinking in his chair. "I wonder if he would have been better off if our father had ... left him."

Clint groaned, and Natasha unobtrusively patted him. She knew. "Seriously? Thor, by that logic, we'd all be better off dead. Dunno about you, doc."

"No, my family life was happy." Selvig finished his drink. "I'm just an ordinary astrophysicist."

"Three functioning parental figures!" Stark said brightly.

"I would be," Banner said, and shrugged self-consciously when the others looked at him. "But I don't get that choice, so..."

"You learn to deal with it," Stark said. "But seriously, buddy, that's kind of insulting. It's all done, you know, you just need to take off the rosy glasses. Like, god, like -- okay, let's start from the top. Something easy. What's the first time you thought something might be wrong?"

"I was very young when father finished the war against Jotunheim," Thor admitted. "I returned from battle to a younger brother, no more than a babe, and for a time our mother was cold to him. I did not think to understand."

"Yeah, uh, I don't think your mum got any better, actually," Clint said. "No offense."

Thor's jawdrop was beautiful, but very, very ill-timed, and she kicked Clint and stole back the rest of her orange. "Explain this to me."

"Uh, actually, uh, how about we ... leave that for another time?" Banner smiled weakly. "Let's -- so, Thor, uh ..."

Cap leaned forward on his elbows, face serious. "Do you think Loki deserved everything?"

Thor made wordless gestures. "Yes. No. I do not know. He was my brother once. Once I loved and knew him best, and now it is as if I knew him not at all. I do not understand, Steve." He drooped in despair. "How did it come to this? We tried, and yet he would not cease."

She exchanged a glance with Stark, who was making the face she wanted to make. "People don't work that way."

"But you yourself," Thor said, confused. "You do something very similar --"

Clint sat up. "Oh, no, no, you are not pulling that shit on Nat --"

She put her hand over his mouth without looking, even it did warm her a little that he understood.
"What I do is see more of someone than they would show otherwise. I can't do that if I'm trying to make them be someone else."

Thor was considering her. "What do you see of my brother, then?"

"A child who doesn't know they are one," she said.

Stark was looking at her thoughtfully. "That's pretty much the problem, isn't it? I mean, there's tragic shit, we've all got tragic shit, but there's tragic shit that's supposed to be tragic because you're a kid and it's not your fault, and there's shit you put up with because you're supposed to be an adult already, and you've been told all your life adults don't whine. And, I mean, I dunno about you guys, but when I was a kid I had great bullshit radar, I could smell bullshit from miles away, and blaming the horse story on him, for one -- that's definitely bullshit. So, it's like ... god, help me out here, I'm not good at this stuff, I failed my SAT verbal."

"Telling a child to accept blame and responsibility like an adult isn't going to work because a fundamental part of the equation is missing," Selvig said to Thor. "They're not adults. Telling them to act like one is telling them to play a game of pretend with rules they physically aren't equipped to understand."

"And then you get imposter syndrome up the wazoo," Clint said. "Fake it 'til you make it, but sometimes you just never make it. Like, okay, since we're sharing and caring now, it's my turn to do the storytime thing, right? I don't know how many of you read my file, I know the doc didn't."

"I did," Stark said. "Your parents were worse than mine and Banner's combined, and that is fucking impressive. I'm impressed. But it's definitely your turn and we've got booze, so ... why not? Want more booze? Anybody want more booze? Of course you do, this is Barton's feelings, everybody wants booze."

Clint rolled his eyes as the sixpack was redistributed and another two were taken out of the fridge. "Thanks," very sarcastic.

Natasha quietly reported them all as off-duty to Hill and shut off the comm to accept her third.

"But basically, okay, let's ... establish some background. You know, this is the opening shot where they do the whole slow pan thing --"

"Hang on, hang on, Jarvis can do that, you want mountains? I can do mountains."

"Sure, why not, mountains, I can be David Attenborough or something."

"David Attenborough?" Cap asked.

"He narrates very beautiful nature documentaries," she said. "He's very soothing."

Stark put his phone on the table and Jarvis obligingly played a slow pan over a Belgian forest. "It didn't look like that, but okay."

"It is beautiful," Cap said. "Is that from one of the documentaries?"

"Planet Earth," she told him. "I'll show you sometime."

"Well, I mean, if you don't like it, I can change it, d'you want a savannah or something, maybe a garbage dump, I can do that --"
"It's fine, it's fine, relax, don't get a bunch in your panties." Clint cleared his throat. "Everybody listening? Good. Okay. I grew up taking care of my parents. I mean, taking care of them. Shopping, cooking, wiping their ass, cleaning, whatever. You can drop the establishing shot now, it's annoying."

"Picky, picky." Stark took his phone back. "Get on with it, Thor's getting antsy."

"I confess I do not understand the relevance," Thor said.

"I'm getting there, big guy. They told me all their shit like I was their best friend. I was a mini-adult. I knew about consequences and responsibility and how to balance a budget and make food stretch and fixing the plumbing. I handled the mortgage, for fuck's sake. Payment for the house," Clint said. "We basically buy places to live on loan and then we slowly repay the loan as we make money. Except even the government said my parents were too crazy to make money, so I had to get creative with their welfare cheques."

"How did you, uh, get away with that?" Banner sounded fascinated and a little repelled. "Didn't the banks notice?"

"Phone," Clint said. "Mostly I just held my nose, like Misthur Komhorr I havd ah pwolbruwm. It worked, I dunno why, it just did. I was five, I didn't exactly have great ideas."

"Well, uh, you know. Banks."

"I'd take offense to that," Stark said, "but the Bank of Tony Stark is Avengers-only, so I don't count."

"Yeah, you keep telling yourself that." Clint grinned and took the rest of her beer, handing her a fresh one. "So, Thor. I knew how to pretend to be an adult. I say pretending because I didn't have a fucking clue, I was just living on spit and a prayer, and I was so shit-scared, every day, constantly, and wishing every day, constantly, that someone would notice and be like 'actually, this shit is fucking bananas, this is not your fucking job, you're not supposed to have to do this'. You know, some sort of, like --"

"Acknowledgement. Recognition? Like, uh, that it's unfair," Banner said, nodding. "Validation?"

"Yup. Yeah, all of that. Just that it was unfair, that'd have been enough for me. Point is, you don't do that to a kid. You don't put all the responsibilities of the world on that kid's head. You don't make them responsible for keeping alive people they give a shit about. People who are supposed to be adults. That was just two bugfuck crazy people who couldn't afford their meds and it almost killed me. And when you get to the point of putting the responsibility for an entire fucking world, responsibility for, you know, the moon and the sun and some goddess woman, on a kid's shoulders and expect them to just handle it, it's just not ever going to work. Ever."

She nodded agreement. "Even when I was trained as an assassin as a child, they built it up slowly so I could become accustomed to my role. It wasn't all at once."

"I'd say, uh, 'do this or we're open to attack and you die' counts as a ... pretty big ... all at once," Banner said.

"Yeeeah, what he said. My dad was a douche, you know, but he didn't make me run the company when I was eight."

Clint gestured around at them and pointed at Thor. "You see what we're saying? You started out being unfair. Most adults couldn't handle that anywhere as well as Loki has. I bet almost nobody
anywhere could. I bet you couldn't handle being raped by a horse for the good of the world, even on pain of death, even knowing it was going to happen. Could you do that, you, personally, deliberately do that, and have the horse's fucking kid, and everyone knows about this thing you did so you wouldn't die, so they all wouldn't die, and everybody thinks you volunteered to do it because you're a twit, and live with yourself afterwards? Hell, I'll put it to the floor. Anybody think they could?"

"Nah," Stark said. "I mean, there's horse porn, but ... I'm not into that."

"I always, uh, feel sorry for the horses," Banner said. "So, uh, yeah, no."

"They mean pornography involving horses for personal masturbation purposes," Natasha said to Thor and Cap.

They made identical faces of revulsion.

Stark shuddered. "God, was it a smart horse? Did it know what was going on? Like -- did it -- was it mutual? Did it know what was going on? Or was it -- I mean -- " He put his face in his hands. "I hate my brain."

"I think I can safely say my professional boundaries exclude sex with horses," Natasha said.

Clint laughed. "Mine too. See, Thor, I find it interesting that you took all of that as a sign of weakness, when it's... I think of myself in that position, and ... no. It's not. It's really, really not."

"I remember Odin riding Sleipnir in the myths," Selvig said. "That's got to be hard to live with."

Stark pressed his forehead against the table with a groan. "I bet he does it in public, I mean, riding your grandkid, there's -- there's a pill or something for that, right?"

Thor opened his mouth, looked at their pointed expressions, and slowly shut it.

"Good answer," Selvig said, and pushed another boilermaker Thor's way.

"We're not doing this to hurt you," Natasha said. "We just have a different interpretation of what's happened to your brother."

"And we have, uh, very strong feelings," Banner. "All the personal history stuff sort of makes everything, uh, personal, so it's a bit ... it's a bit close for us. I -- I think it is?"

"Oh, yeah," Stark muttered, and there was general agreement around the table, Natasha included. Especially Natasha.

Her professional boundaries now excluded it. Before was a different story. If her handler asked it of her -- she would have.

"Thor?" Cap leaned forward again. "We're not saying he's a good person or you have to forgive him or he hasn't done anything wrong. He has, he's done some unforgiveable things, things I have a lot of problems with, too."

"Genocide is a definite no-no," Stark said, wagging his finger. "I don't care who you are."

"Like Tony says. It's more that there are some things that we think no-one deserves. It doesn't matter how evil he is or what he's done, it's still wrong to us that this has happened to him. To anyone."

Clint waved his hand to get Thor's attention; he looked to Natasha on the verge of storming out, or fleeing, or both, eyes glass-bright and his shoulders trembling. "Thor. I just got one question. Could
"No," Thor wailed, and burst into tears.

"Oh, God, we made him cry, what's with us and making gods cry, there's gotta be a law against this or something, I'll make one, state of New York only, I'll get right on it. Thor, buddy -- fuck, okay, Selvig, give him a hug or something --"

Selvig wrapped an arm around Thor and pulled him in, patting his back. "It's a lot to take in, son. It's all right. It's all right."

"It is not," Thor said, muffled by Selvig's shirt. "It is not. Nothing will ever, ever be all right. Nothing. You are so wrong, you are all wrong, and yet I remember my brother's face while we laughed. My father is a good man. You must believe me. He is a good man. He would not -- he would not do so knowingly. He would not."

Natasha quietly finished her bottle and set it down. "Do you believe that?"

"Yes. I -- yes," very young and lost. "I want to. I want to, very much. I have never wanted so. I believe so. And yet your mortal senses are so different. So wrong. You are so wrong, and yet I could allow them as truths, if I chose to, and it is so much. You do not know how much. I cannot bear it."

"Son, your brain's going to rattle out of your ears if you keep holding it in like this," Selvig said, rubbing Thor's back. "You're a very confused young man. There's nothing wrong with that."

Thor choked snot and tears. "A prince must not know uncertainty. A king much less."

Clint nudged her, and she lifted an eyebrow, then nodded and leaned out of the way a little, deliberately fading herself and letting him take the foreground.

"Thor, you don't know us all that well, but we're your team. We could be friends eventually, but right now it doesn't matter that you're a prince or you're going to be king, you're part of the team. It's okay to doubt your mission to your team. Everyone does it and we're, all right, this is corny but I'm serious here. We're your team. You're part of the Avengers, that makes you team. We're here for you."

"That's ... uh, that's how it works in books," Banner said incredulously, smiling a little. "That's real?"

"Oh, yeah," Clint said. "It's real. I'm the king of keeping it real. Come on, fistbump."

"Even if you really fucking piss me off by being so oblivious, and you are seriously seriously oblivious, you're a goddamn ostrich and I'm gonna go be one too because seriously I can't fucking stand all the feelings up in here -- yeah. What he said." Stark scowled. "I'm never ever agreeing with you again by the way, that's just wrong, it's wrong, I feel unnatural."

"Sure, Stark. You do that." They bumped fists, grinning.

Natasha reached across the table and put her hand on Thor's. "You don't have to believe everything we say. You don't have to believe everything your people say. We're asking a lot of you and as long as you're here Agent Barton and I will help you figure things out if you need us to. All you have to do is ask."

He looked up at her, tearstreaked and ragged. "You will question with me if I require it? I have not had such a luxury. There was no-one to do so. My friends cannot, they are ever bound by law, and Loki was my brother. I could not be weak before him, I could not bear it. But you --" He met her
eyes, pleading. "You will give your word?"

She squeezed his hand. "I promise."
"I thought was Loki unusual," Thor said from behind him, cradling a bottle of beer. Everyone dispersed after a while, too uncomfortable or too tired to stick around, and Tony was alone with Thor while Bruce and Selvig were figuring out what to do with the blue stick of destiny. So naturally they were both mostly drunk now, or at least Tony was halfway there, because dealing with Thor with either of them sober was something he really, really wanted to avoid.

Tony fiddled with the demos, adjusting ratios and shifting material just in case he could squeeze out a bit more efficiency, and didn't bother pretending he didn't know what Thor meant. Obfuscating stupidity wasn't worth it when it came to Thor. "Nah, he's one of a kind. Just not that way."

Thor's frown was audible. "Are all your people so unhappy?"

"Nope." Tony dragged his stool to the table and went for the soldering iron, wiping the tip. "Superheroes just aren't well-adjusted. You're getting a pretty narrow view of people from us. Like ... there's nobody like us. Anywhere. There's definitely nobody like me for starters, if there were I'd sue for copyright infringement so fast their heads would fall off. Most people aren't actually all that unhappy."

"But you are. Or you are not?"

"Actually, right now ..." Tony thought about it. "No, I'm actually pretty good. I've got interesting stuff to work on, I'm making friends and influencing people, I'm introducing Steve to modern music, that's always good for a laugh -- he loves Radiohead, it's awesome -- and I mean, I grew up in a bad way, but I've fixed most of it. Or at least it doesn't bother me so much anymore." He flicked a magnifying lamp into position. Goddamn fiddly circuit integrity. "I've got a lot of trainwreck behind me, don't get me wrong, but the point is it's behind. Not, you know, in front. Am I confusing you? I'm confusing you, aren't I."

Thor rolled the bottle between his hands. "I understand that you are exceptional. You have made that clear yourself, many times."

Tony gave him a thumbsup. "It means I approve. I'm a smug fuck, I know. Because I'm right. Go on."

"I do not wish to intrude," Thor said, and really, the big guy being so hesitant about things was really weird. "You appear distracted. I would not interfere."

"No, no, talk, you're not bothering me. Usually I play really loud music or something, but your voice works fine, so -- go on, blab about whatever. I heard what Romanova said. Goes for me too, even if I'm not super duper Emotion Man."

"I understand Romanova and Clint. They are warriors, and I have spoken to them before, but your impression of me was not ... favourable. I acted in haste, and made enemies where I should not."
Tony would be more offended by the description of them as warriors and Tony as *not* when he could see how slowly and carefully Thor was trying to avoid offending him with bad wording. Which told him that a) he remembered Tony had been offended and b) he cared enough to try not to offend him again, which added up into c) a one-time pass.

"Yeah, no, I don't like you all that much, you should know that, but you should also know I know very goddamn personally what it's like to have your entire fucking purpose and reason and life flipped into a soggy mess. It sucks, it's brutal, and if I can give life advice -- hell, why not. Gives me something to do."

Thor opened another bottle with a twist of his fingers, draining half of it in a slow pull. At least the mead wasn't going to waste. "How do you free yourself from its shadow?"

"Uh, I wouldn't recommend getting really drunk and smashing things and making yourself sick on doughnuts and come until you're pretty much hallucinating sixty epiphanies per second in some casino bathroom, which is what I did, I really don't recommend it, but, you know, in the end it's just ... it happened. I can't change that. It's annoying, it really fucking is, but part of the point of being who I am is that I'm used to my mistakes and fuckups and everything, really, being on global permanent record. People in Cote d'Ivoire know when I fart in a bar. It comes with the name."

"Crown Prince of Asgard is not so different," Thor said, subdued. Even rat-haired and wiping his nose with the back of his hand he was drop-dead gorgeous. "I am watched, always, and there are few I can trust. To consort with the wrong woman, or speak to the wrong man, is to invite gossip. Some is inevitable, and some is purposed only to strike me. Heimdall sees me, and he speaks of me to my father whenever he feels he must. He speaks often."

"Creepy," Tony said, slotting the iron and taking a closer look with a pair of needle pliers. "Sounds like my house. Couldn't do much without it getting back to my dad. I snuck out a lot. Sneaked out," clarifying. "It worked until he put trackers in me when I had my tonsils out. Does Heimdall just hate you, or what?"

Thor shook his head. "No. He does not experience the way any of us do. He is unto himself, always, and his thoughts are his own as he wills. But he is sworn to obey my father." He fidgeted, making the table shake until Tony tsked and smacked his knuckles. "As I am sworn."

Tony raised an eyebrow. "So how'd you get down here?"

"He did not forbid me," Thor said. "Neither did he encourage it."

"Oh, that game," Tony said dismissively. "Don't worry about it. If he can't tell you what he wants, to hell with him. You can't read his mind. As far as you know he's deliriously happy you're down here."

Thor smiled. "I doubt it. He defends Midgard, but neither he does he express care. You are an obligation, I think, one of many."

"Ah, but you don't actually know he disapproves until he tells you, do you? That's an opening, a damn good one. You've got to take advantage of that." He mixed himself a martini and sipped it, stretching his arm back over his shoulder.

The benches weren't quite the right height; he'd have to take an arc welder to them tomorrow, lower them a little. Or do something to the stools. Or both. Why the fuck had he insisted on bar stools? God, sometimes he drove himself crazy with the crazy.
"Guess you have already, if you're here. He'll just have to learn to talk when he wants something, won't he." He considered Thor's melancholy picking at the bottle label. "Fess up. I mean, confess. The worst thing about all of this. The worst. Is it -- you're wrong? or he's right?"

"Of it all? That Loki may be right," Thor said, and twitched a smile. "Yet again. I am not clever as he, and many times he used it to his advantage. I hear him as best as I can, for much of the time he offers wisdom and insight beyond compare, but it never eases. The more he lied and the more I trusted the less I knew what to make of his words at all. He made me a laughingstock before the court more than once, and I did not care for it."

"Nobody likes an embarrassment," Tony said. "Well, I mean, if you can't turn it to your advantage. A lot of people try to embarrass me. I just get around it by just never being shy about anything, ever. Usually it backfires. If I'm feeling spiteful enough I make damn sure it does."

Thor sighed. "Do you think he meant it as a lesson? As you have taken it?"

He was so obviously trying to figure out a way to make Loki loveable, and Tony kind of pitied him. It was like trying to hug it out with desert plantlife that was probably poisonous and definitely wanted you dead. Somebody was gonna leave hurting, and it wasn't the cactus.

"I don't know," Tony said. "I don't get him. I mean, like -- sometimes? But, no, he's too ... he tries too hard to be mysterious. There's a point where most people just go like 'fuck it, I give up, there's nothing there anyway' and he passed that point for me a looooooong time ago. Maybe he's testing you. Maybe he's just being a dick. Maybe he's trying to make you learn something. Maybe he's Maybelline. Damned if I know."

"Does he not wish me to know of him?" Thor made a hurt noise and swigged again. "Does he not want me to understand?"

"Probably not."

"Why? I am his brother. I would understand, if he would let me. If he would not forbid me to speak of it, to ask amends. I do not wish him hurt, but I would know of his."

Tony thought about Pepper. "Maybe he doesn't want to hurt you either? I mean, come on, it's scary shit, we can all pretty much groove on that. It's scary shit. You're going cry buckets and buckets. And, no offense, but I don't want to see that either. Nothing wrong with manly tears, it's just you're a god and it makes me uncomfortable."

Thor gave a shaky chuckle. "You are uncomfortable with a great many things."

"Yup." Tony picked up the iron again. That configuration would totally work better; he'd have to document it later so Selvig didn't ruin it with a fix. "Look, it freaks me out when you cry, okay, and I haven't grown up with you being, like, indestructible and princely and 'men shall shed no tears except over lost kittens and fallen comrades' or whatever, so you've probably already shot yourself in the foot on that one."

"I have shed tears in front of him before. It rarely ended well for me." Thor sounded like he wanted to laugh, though. 'There as a time when I was beginning to know the Lady Sif, and I peered upon her weapons practice without permission. She boxed my ears most dreadfully."

Tony couldn't help laughing. "How old were you?"

"Not very. Thirteen of your namedays, perhaps, and she fifteen. I was most upset, and ran to my brother. He was learning healing arts, and was most skilled, in part I think because I gave him much
practice. I told him of what had happened, begging much sympathy. He did heal me, but told me it served me quite right, and threatened to turn me into a toad. A servant caught me as I escaped and told Sif's mother and mine, and they ordered my punishment outside the walls. He followed me with an illusion to the city gates, laughing all the while." Thor grinned. "I was very cross."

"That's kind of cute," he said, cleaning the solder tip again. Tony hated this alloy -- it was sticky, which was good, but seriously, so much goddamn buildup. "I mean, I'm an only child, but that's cute."

Thor shook his head, stifling a laugh. "Oft my temper took hold of me, and he followed me, the better to rescue me from my folly. Oft I had servants to his quarters with food and wine when he had shut himself with scrolls. 'I am busy, brother, I am learning', he told me. I would tell him skill at posts, or with arms, was learning too, and he would scold me for if he could not read it, he would not do it, and if I were not the sort to write it, I was not the one to persuade him." He got the sad look again. "We were ever brothers."

Tony shook his head. Thor got goddamn lyrical when he was drinking. "Sometimes I wonder what your dad's plan was. I mean, taking a kid, okay. But Bruce said you keep slaves, so I don't get why he got raised your brother, and not in the kitchen or something."

"More like he would be bedslave than scullery," Thor said, shifting in that really annoying, really telling way that meant he was uncomfortable. "Mine, perhaps, and given as a gift to me. To take bedsport with a frost giant is rare, dangerous, and all the more prized. Likely my father knew the mark of Laufey's house and thought it an ill fate."

He pointed in a vaguely base-wards direction, holding in curses. "He knows that too, right?"

"Yes," Thor said heavily. "It is impossible he would not."

"Okaaaay." He had a bad feeling about this. "So who told you that?"

"Our mother. Bestla, father's mother, was one such, and Borr, the father of my father, lay with her on the eve of his gift."

"Shiiit. Buddy, buddy -- somebody fucked up." Tony swigged. God. "Somebody had to have fucked up. Is there anything right now that -- oh, God, don't tell me, you can actually give him, can't you? You can sell him."

Thor glared. "I would not."

"Oh, God. I bet he knows that too." Tony pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. "Would your dad? Like, would he --" Okay, that was an interesting sensation, vertigo and distinctly non-vertigo need to puke. Okay, moving on. No puking. "Would he have made Loki marry Laufey or somebody? Like, if he could -- make them, there's the whole consort thing, and they'd do it for the magic winter box, right? Like, they'd do basically anything, so, like -- I mean, could he?"

And they'd do anything for their kids, too, apparently. That was just diabolical.

Thor was on his feet. "He would not!"

He hated having the least fucked up parents in a room, no matter what Bruce said. It sucked. God, it sucked.

"COULD HE?"
Thor deflated. "Yes. But he would never --"

"No, no, that's basically all I needed to know, your dad keeps so many options open it's a wonder his head doesn't, like, fall off from all the holes. Just sit your ass down, I'm just going to sit here and take that in. I need a fucking drink." Oh, good, he had one. That was good.

Odin ... not so good.

"Please tell me we've got, like, confirmation bias going on here, right? Odin is just an exception?"

"There are none like Loki on Asgard," Thor said, warily taking his seat again. "He is ... unusual. In every aspect."

"So the rest of you are probably actually really nice, it's just the royal family. Well, that's royal families for you, isn't it, they're always fucked up, we've learned that. We've learned that damn well, dynasties just break down after a while, it's inevitable." He took a deep breath and let it out -- he could breathe all the way down now, it was amazing, it was fantastic -- and pushed the iron out of the way. "Thor, you -- okay, I -- you know, it's --"

Oh, God. Thor was just looking at him, so concerned and distraught and confused, and Tony just couldn't, couldn't finish the sentence. He couldn't. Telling Thor he wouldn't put it past Odin to sell Loki to his own brother to make sure he was controlled was ... no, that was -- that wasn't kicking puppies, that was shooting them with a grenade launcher.

It would've even worked, that was the thing. That was the worst part. Thor would've sincerely believed it was for Loki's own good, and if they'd left the gag on it wasn't like Loki could've even told him anything different, and with how docile Loki had been it could've taken a good long while for him to start resisting, and by then Thor already would've been worked over by his parents.

All these plans and they would've worked. Some of them probably would still work if Thor swung back to believing they were always right and Loki acted up at the wrong moment. Which, of course, Loki did, because it was Loki and the kid was unstable and kind of a troll and seriously bad at long-term planning.

Tony kind of actually had to respect Frigga and Odin -- they'd clearly earned their position as 'nastiest motherfuckers in the universe' and at least half of that just had to be how fast they could turn a situation into win-win-win-fuckingwin. Too bad it didn't have an off switch and just idled in the background all the time.

It actually probably couldn't be turned off -- fuck knew Tony couldn't ever, ever, ever turn off Tony Fucking Stark, and he actually didn't even know how anymore. He could soften it, but drop it? It was him, the way Iron Man was him. Tony Stark was nothing without Tony Fucking Stark. He'd lay good odds Odin was nothing without his King of Asgard title, too.

All of it was like looking in a mirror tilted a few degrees off center. Not a lot. Just a few.

Too bad they didn't ever, ever plan for the Avengers. They'd had no reason to. Why would they worry about a sleepy little blue postage stamp realm full of hives and garbage?

Suckers. They'd skipped the product review.

"Friend?" It was very, very shaky. "Are you well?"

"Oh, I'm --" Tony took a closer look. "Oh, shit, no, I'm not pissed off at you, I just really -- I really don't like what your dad does to you, okay?"
"Sometimes I fear I loathe him, and I am afraid of its depth. I cannot match him and I cannot surpass him. I cannot reach my brother. I speak to my mother and she tells me of my father's purpose for me, but will not say what it is, only that I am to be king. What is there for me?" Thor was clinging to the bottle now. "What can I do but follow where I am led?"

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, my God, melodrama runs in the family, doesn't it, it totally does. You have no idea how alike you and Loki actually are. No idea." Tony went back to soldering, because if he didn't do something with his hands he was going to shake Thor, and there was no way that'd end well. "I didn't actually mean you're going to fail. You won't. You know why? You're not your dad. There's like ... no way you can actually fail to be a better person. Unless you stop being you and it goes horribly wrong, but that's a scenario that'll -- keep me up at night, actually, but anyway --"

Thor interrupted him, which was just rude. "Do you hate your father?"

"God, yes," Tony said. "And I hate my mum, and I hate Justin Hammer, and I hate the barista that shorts me on espresso whenever I'm on page five and says she'll pray for my misbegotten soul. I hate my parents. I hate Obie. I hate my PE teacher at boarding school. I hate my combinatorics professor because she made me learn MLA and f*cked me up on referencing for the rest of my life. I hate quite a lot, actually. I'm not any the worst for it. I can't actually get much worse, though, let's be honest."

He saw Thor settle into brooding, frowning at something a thousand yards away, and Tony actually managed to close up two sides before Thor started talking again.

"I remember," so soft and slow Tony barely heard it over the hiss of the iron cutting into the sponge, "after Angrboda. The party was I, Sif, and the Warriors Three, and two of my father's guards. We had searched Jotunheim, and much had happened. But we had him with us, and though he was thin, and bloody, and hostile, he was my brother still. He smiled at me with her blood on his teeth and asked if I was satisfied. I ... I did not understand. I fear I may. I envied him."

Thor blew out a breath. "I do not wish to disturb you --"

Tony snorted. "I'm always disturbed. It's not like I sleep anyway. Go on. You were jealous, right?"

"Yes. I envied him. I envied him his children, and took pleasure in tearing them from his hands. I took still more satisfaction in cleaving Angrboda in two, and crushing the spill of her bowels. She died cursing me, not entreating him, and from her gaze I took most pleasure of all." Thor's face was pale, his jaw set, eyes fixed somewhere very, very far away, and Tony listened because right now it was all he could do. "Oh, I loathed her. To hide, and never be seen -- I have yearned for that. How I have yearned."

"So he had what you wanted? Kids, family, somewhere to be, no creepy gatekeeper?"

"Yes."

"And you ... went in there and -- what? Rescued him?"

"We did." But Thor's eyes slid away. "Of course we did. She was cruel, and he was young. It was not right that she kept him. It was not right that she used him so."

He raised an eyebrow. Both eyebrows. He pulled down his sunglasses for extra effect. "That's the whole reason you decided to make sure she had a really slow and painful death? Nothing else?"

Thor was silent, eyes still fixed on the floor, and a muscle in his jaw twitched.

"Uh-huh." Tony sat back. "You know, you talk a lot about lying to people and how it totally doesn't work because it's basically bending reality and that's bad, and you don't do it, or you can't, so you're
like the total antithesis of a car salesman, but god, you're good at lying to yourself. Frankly, I'm a little -- I thought I had the market cornered, but you two just keep right on surprising me."

"It was not right."

He was shaking so badly against the table Tony couldn't even touch the iron to the framework. He sighed and put it back in the holder and settled in with a drink to pay as much attention as he could without rolling his eyes. He didn't actually mean to be condescending or dismissive, it was just reflex. Horrible, inappropriate reflex.

Tony was like the least appropriate person ever for this. "What wasn't?"

"It was not right that he had what I could not. He had all I wanted, he had all I desired, and he did not deserve it. He could never deserve it. He was --" Thor made a strangled noise. "He was a weak little thing and I hated him, I hated how she looked at him, I hated -- he should not have had children. He should have waited for me, I the eldest, he should not have escaped where I could not follow, he should not have taken what I longed for, he should have -- why did he leave me behind? Why did he leave me there? Why was I alone? It was not his place to go forth. He were only ever to remain behind, and I -- I took it from him, I took it all, and I was glad to crush it, to crush him, to have him with me, for if I were to suffer, so would he always as long as we lived, and it was right."

He sagged, putting a hand over his eyes, voice breaking. "It was right. Blessed realms, forgive me."

Tony took a long, long slow drink and waited out the shudders until Thor straightened his shoulders and wiped his face. "Sounds like you've been holding that in a while," he said, tone as neutral as he could make it.

Thor gulped from one of the bottles, wiping his mouth on his shoulder. "Centuries. Forever. Always. I. I thought, I wished to think, he was ... better off. Freer. He held his own counsel, and cared not for the others. He was able not to care. He did not need to. I disliked that about him. How I disliked it. Oh, I have so much to -- so much to tell. Will you listen? I know I am -- if only you will listen. If I may speak. May I?"

"Go ahead. You've already said a hell of a lot, why stop now? Just don't go leaning on the table, I can't work if you're wobbling it."

"Oh. I did not mean to."

Thor took his hands off and crossed them over his chest, rubbing his mouth as he talked, and Tony kept soldering, glancing up at him every once in a while to show him he was listening, and sometimes Thor twitched a smile back.

"But I was glad, too, that someone could. That they were not everything for everyone, and if someone could defy them, perhaps not all was lost for me. Perhaps I could rule as Thor Odinson, not Odin's son." Thor gulped again, biting the tip of his thumb. "But he changed, and he no longer spoke, only tricked and lied, and grew cold to me, and I could not stand for it. They changed him, and I resented him for giving in. I took it very hard, and blamed him. Perhaps I still do. I -- I may, still." He looked up at the ceiling, blinking hard, and finished the last third of the bottle, setting it down with excessive care, the first sign that he might not be entirely sober other than pouring his heart out to a guy he barely knew. "I have ever tried to be a good brother, but in my heart I am not."

Tony shrugged. "I dunno, you sound pretty normal to me, actually. I mean, I'm not an expert, like I said I'm an only child, but, you know, it's the whole ... like, you had more responsibilities, or whatever, and the younger one gets more freedom, right? And it's kind of uneven and everyone
whines about how unfair it is and whatever. But that's just too easy for you guys, isn't it? Like, this is -- if it were a normal situation, okay, but it's not and, you know, being him is a shitty, shitty consolation prize for the 'freedom' to watch your lover bleed out and have your kids taken away, you know? I'd want my money back too. I'd want my money and everyone else's money and their pensions and, I don't know, their office supplies. All of their pens just to be a dick."

Thor spread his hands in a gesture Tony recognised from Loki. "I do not deny him his vengeance. I only -- I wish it had not come here. I wish he had not involved Midgard. I would not have had you embroiled in this wretched business if there were a choice."

"Yeah, you kind of missed the train on that one."

"I know." He sighed. "I love him so, and for its strength my failures cut all the deeper. Would you care if I remained, and did not speak overmuch? I have need of silence, but I would not be alone."

Tony honestly didn't care so long as he got the housing finished, and if Thor would just stay off the fucking table he could do it a lot faster. "Sure. There's a blanket or something there if you want to sleep."

"I will. Thank you."

"Yeah, no problem. Just, you know. Try not to say any of that to his face? I don't want to deal with the explosions, I hate cleanup, Fury will kill me."

"Even the little I truly know of him is enough for that, metal man."

"Just checking." Thor went to sleep eventually, and Tony worked through the night to the rhythm of his snores, jazzed on endless cups of coffee and intensely, intensely disturbed.

Give a supervillain clothes and this was what they got. This was why they couldn't do nice things. This.
Watching Nat carry the stick of destiny like it fit right into her hands was a very, very weird experience for Clint.

He remembered, very intensely, how it had pricked his chest, the change that had come up and down and over, pulling truth over his eyes and forcing him to serve without knowing why.

He also remembered that she'd been holding it for at least a few minutes before she'd closed the portal with it, and apparently she'd been just fine.

It was still so very weird to watch her, though. She handled it so easily. Part of it was training, and Clint had personally fieldtested most of her proficiency while he was still debating recruiting her and found out she had the muscle memory of training with quarterstaffs even though she didn't remember a damn thing of it, so the way she carried it made sense. But the other part of it was that it should've looked ridiculous in her hands, the way it looked like a fake toy in Loki's, and it didn't. It didn't.

It suited her, even with the gap where the gem had been. That was on the counter next to Clint, glittery and sparkly like bad costume jewellery, and they'd gone over and over it and as far as they could tell, without the gem the spear was just a stick of gold and some other unidentified conductive metal.

"You have no heart. Merely shadows given form in mirrors stained with blood which will never dry," Loki said, methodically turning the bracelets on his wrists and half-smiling.

It actually sounded like a compliment.

Clint scowled at him, grateful for the guards surrounding them and his own bow on his back. "That's creepy."

Natasha was doing the thoughtful headtilt, shifting it from hand to hand. "He has a point."

"Nat," pained, they'd talked about this, it'd been terrible, "he really, really doesn't."

"No, I mean," leaning on the staff like it wasn't the blue stick of destiny, just a stick, "he does. It works on the core of a person. The heart is a metaphor for the sense of self, isn't it?"

Loki shrugged and bent metal that Clint was pretty sure shouldn't have been able to fold like origami, handing it back to Selvig, who took it with quiet thanks.

Sometimes Clint just didn't get Selvig. The guy was sensible, for sure, and it made sense to use Loki's help, but how did he work with the guy that'd been in his head for so long even before the blue stick of destiny got involved? Clint only had a few days and he wanted to raze the smirk off
Loki's face so badly his fingernails ached.

He bent another sheet of metal, delicately scoring embossed lines with the back of a nail and checking it against Selvig's blueprints. "I do like metaphors."

She smiled. "And I'm one."

"You writhe in the shadows of your namesake, bearing its face and none of its integrity," Loki said gently. "The gem may heighten what you have. It cannot change a self you do not know to provide."

"So basically I just have bucketloads of self-confidence and that's why it worked so well on me?" Clint hauled himself onto a table. He liked the base labs much better than Stark's -- Stark's was too purposeless, too scattered, too much to hand. Everything and everyone in this lab had a reason for being there. "I can't decide if that's blessed with suck or cursed with awesome."

Nat laughed at him. It was easier to look at her with it when she was smiling like that. "Stop reading that site. Why don't you put it down to competence?"

"I can do that," Clint said, smiling back. God, he missed Phil. He'd been all about competence, had drilled it into their heads that it was the only way to be, the only way to survive. It wasn't enough to be good at their jobs; they had to be competent, encompassing so much more than a few rules and a target.

He was carefully not thinking about who killed Phil or Phil's actual operational status, classified beyond his reach unless he broke a whole lot of promises. That path was going to lead into a whole lot of shit, even more bad decisions, and Fury laying into him up, down and sideways. He'd built up a good streak of avoiding those lectures and he wasn't about to break it for some emo kid with a punchable face.

It was a very punchable face, to be fair.

"How did you explain this to my brother?" Loki said, fingers circling between them.

It was easy to guess what he meant -- letting Loki out of his cage? Letting him near the stick? Letting him work on a prototype containment unit with Selvig? Letting him in the same room with them?

"We didn't," Nat said. "He's otherwise occupied."

"He's snoring like the dickens," Clint said. "And sleeping through Banner and Stark's pissing matches, which, after that, I don't think a nuclear strike would wake him up. He'd just roll over. Those dudes get loud."

Loki was glancing between them from under his eyelashes, very doubtful. "You are certain his temper will not release the beast." There were a million flavours of what-the-fuck-are-you-on embedded in that question, which, one beatdown from the Hulk and he was worried? Really now.

It was a lot of fun to be unfair in the privacy of his own head.

Clint rolled his eyes. "We'd know. I figure if we can give you an inch, we might as well give him a mile. See how you both take it."

That got him a very pissy eyebrow and a cold shoulder. Fine by him.

Nat twirled the stick. "Where did you get this, by the way? I doubt they'd store the gem in something this easy to steal."
Loki gave her a sour look. "It came as a package. I know not where they keep their priceless artifacts."

"Liar," Clint sing-songed. It was Loki. He was totally lying.

And ... bingo, look at that grin. "Treasures are all the same."

"I shouldn't know exactly what you mean, but I totally do. They are, aren't they? And they have the weird ideas of how to lay the whole thing out, and it's like, are you fucking serious?"

"Why have a treasury at all? It is rather an invitation."

"Exactly. And do you know how annoying it is when they're like, oh, nobody will just stroll right into this here room because my guns are so manly --"

"The guards are always pathetically trained, the artifacts poorly concealed, and yet I am meant to be intimidated by a grammatically incorrect warning," Loki sighed and buffed his nails on his shirt. "Very tiresome."

"Yeah, they have shitty response teams. Like, if you actually cared about your shit, you wouldn't put them on pedestals. The only one seeing it is you! Why would you do that? Why not just keep it in a drawer or something? Give me something to work with here, come on."

Loki nodded very seriously. "I share your frustration."

Nat was snorfling into the back of her hand.

Clint facepalmed and rewound the last two minutes and brought up the other hand to facepalm harder. "Fuck, I had a bro moment. With you. I'm wiping this from my brain. Fuck you, Nat. Fuck you too," pointing at Loki. "Except not, stay away from me."

"Do not flatter yourself," Loki sneered.

"I take offense to that, my suit is very flattering. Purple is my colour, and the negative ease is just divine on my firm, shapely ass."

Clint held the straight face as long as he could in the face of Loki's disgust before he snuck a pic on his phone and cracked up.

"Son, I'm sure it's very nice, but I don't want to hear about your ass." Selvig put another sheet of blueprints in front of Loki. "Think you can make that work?"

"Easily." Loki looked at it for a moment, very critical, and started pointing out errors, he and Selvig close together. Watching them was strange -- Selvig was correcting Loki as much as Loki was correcting him even though he barely came up to Loki's nose, and Loki brushed his hair behind his ears and watched Selvig's face with weirdly respectful attention, nodding as he talked.

Nat bumped Clint's knee, the stick mercifully on her other side, tucked in the crook of her elbow. "You surprise me."

"I surprise me," he muttered. "Lots of surprises lately. You're right, you know. We weren't trained for this. Any of it." He exchanged a look with her. "Any of them."

Cap was an issue all on his own. Loki? Issue. Thor? Issues. Combined? Issues out the fucking wazoo. The pair of them, he and Nat, issues galore but they bounced them off each other and it
worked, they worked together in a hell of a lot more ways than one. Banner was one giant goddamn
wound that'd never heal -- so, issues there, definitely.

The worst one was Stark. Stark scared Clint.

Clint wasn't afraid of alien gods and supersoldiers, monsters and spies with body counts rivalling his,
robots and machines, intergalactic war and waiting for his parents' genetics to catch up and drive him
out of his mind. He wasn't afraid of any of it. Pissed off, mostly. Indifferent.

But Stark knew how powerful he was, and the thing was: regimes died, gods left, soldiers broke
down, monsters wandered off. Corporations weren't people. Power wasn't people.

It was what could be done in the name of something else.

Stark was that something else. He didn't need a stick of destiny or a hammer or a serum; he had
backdoors into everything and everywhere, and if he chose just even a little differently, they'd all die
trying to kill him with weapons that would malfunction and satellites that wouldn't tell them
anything, screaming into dead comms and waiting for rides that never came because everything was
the property of Stark Industries.

He appreciated that Stark saved Fury's ass -- he did, really, Fury would've been insufferable
otherwise and anyone else would've been worse. SHIELD would've folded in a year, tops.

But bringing Stark into a position of absolute power -- consultant, his ass -- was the worst decision
Fury ever made. It was a cult of personality, and they were stuck in the middle of it.

And Loki wasn't stupid. Loki had to know that -- it was goddamn obvious. "Why'd you take out the
shrapnel, anyway? He said it was a debt or something."

"Didn't like red in your ledger?" Nat said next to him, and he nudged her. Down, Nat.

Loki gave them a very superior glare. "I find such debt best avoided. I owe Odin my life, my
happiness, my torment," stalking toward them, "I owe him all that has shaped me. Look upon what
he has wrought, and ask me again."

"Doesn't look too bad to me," Clint said. "Your hair's kind of pretty when it gets washed. That's a
plus."

"You mean that," settling into a wicked grin. "You truly mean that, do you not? Do you expect me
to find comfort in such things?"

Loki was close enough now that Clint could feel the chill and the power banked in him, could feel
Nat lift her chin in readiness, and his laughter was old, old, old. Wordless gallows humour, the grin
before the axe came down, the way some targets licked their lips in anticipation before they died like
death was a wedding banquet and Clint was their plus one.

"Nah," Clint said, meeting his eyes straight on with a grin right back. "I expect you to wash your
goddamn hair once in a while."

Loki scrutinised him, leaning close and tall, something hungry about it. "And what will you do if I
do not?"

He could meet his eyes, talk to him, and keep his hands down. He could do it because of all the
above, because there were better things to be scared of, because he had priorities, because he'd loved
Phil and this was the god who'd killed him.
Clint was never going to be able to satisfy how much, how often, how completely and totally he wanted Loki dead, and knowing his hate wasn't even human -- well, that just made it all resolve into clear, fine understanding, didn't it? Clint hated him on his own terms, for sure.

That was the point. His hate was a puny little mortal thing. It was a fucking fly compared to the way Loki hated himself, and that was what Loki planted in his head, all wrapped up like a present. That was what Loki felt. That was what he thought he deserved from Clint.

Clint just couldn't goddamn compete. There was nothing he could do, nothing, that Loki hadn't already done to himself. Nothing new, nothing inventive, nothing creative. It was all boring. Old hat. A guy up against that kind of all-encompassing hate just couldn't cut it. It'd take a god. It'd take Odin. Clint was maybe the furthest thing from Odin possible.

Given the shit he'd heard about the guy? He could live with being nothing like him.


Loki didn't move, just stared a while longer, hands half-curling on the edge of something, and Nat pinched Clint's calf and set her hand on the spear.

"Loki," Selvig said. He looked tired and frustrated to hell. That was the problem with civilians. They started out numb, then they freaked out, and then they just got too tired to listen. "Would you come here, please? I fixed the problems, but I don't know how well it'll reflect now."

Loki tipped his head Selvig's way, eyes still fixed on Clint. "Why don't not threaten? You could. You have the tools. Perhaps I would allow your tortures for a time." He chuckled. "Perhaps I would whimper, if you were cruel enough. You have it in you. In your heart," the same sick certainty he'd had when he stuck Clint with the sceptre and stole his mind. "Would it not please you?"

Clint shrugged and fixed a buckle starting to work its way free on his thigh, letting his eyes wander over Loki's face. Angular. Young. It was a face he'd destroyed a thousand times, a face he'd carved inwards with arrows and explosives, teeth dripping from arcing gums into the endless pull of the Tesseract.

In every dream, every time Loki died, his eyes rolled as wildly as the man he'd killed on Clint's request in Stuttgart and leaked jewels from their pupils, blood and irises leaking colour to stain them rubies and emeralds until Loki was nothing more than a scrap of skin scarred blue.

All Clint did when he woke up afterwards was bury Loki's screams behind his teeth.

"Actually, no. I'd rather just ask." He looked up at him. "So ... mind backing off a bit?"

Loki withdrew, licking his teeth, and went to Selvig's side. When he glanced over his shoulder Clint refused to be the one that looked away first, and for a moment Loki actually looked sorry.

Nat jiggled his leg. "Clint."

"Yeah?"

She was frowning at him, arms folded, and he could see her piecing things together, could see her worry even if no-one else could. Clint put his arm around her, his nose in her hair, and breathed in. "You were compromised," she said against his cheek.

"Yeah. Compromised all to hell." He tuck a bit of hair behind her ear and leaned back. "Still okay
"You need time off," she said, eyebrows crinkled together and running her tongue along the corner of her bottom lip. "A lot more time off."

Clint chuckled. "Like that's gonna happen. Fury needs me too much. You need me too much. I need you too much," after a bit. "Tell you what, though. We make this work, I'm charging a month's worth of triple overtime. And I'm paying you back."

"Hill's already set up an Avengers food account," she said. "How'd you bribe her?" He bumped shoulders with her; she was warm, her arms rounded with muscle, and it helped to pull his head away from that endless, sinking cold. "Don't tell me more vodka."

"Crate of Drambuie," Nat said. "And two months copyediting team reports. She says Stark's punctuation makes her eyes bleed. She's lucky I'm Russian. I'm immune to bad grammar."

Clint took the sceptre, rolling it in his hands. It was warm where she'd been holding it but otherwise it was hollow metal, cool to the touch and heavier than it should've been. "It's like Russians are immune to everything."

"Siberia," she said.

"That's fair," and he handed it back. "You gonna keep it?"

Nat turned it over in her hands and shrugged. "It's shiny and pointy. I like shiny, pointy things. Loki, do you mind if I keep this?"

Loki glanced up from bending metal in ways it just should not goddamn bend without a whole lot of heat and some serious tools, hair falling in his eyes. "Do as you wish."

Clint considered it. "You could poke Thor when he's being a dick."

"That," Nat said, "would take too much time. And it'd upset Selvig."

"Yes, it would," Selvig said, coming closer with a pair of tongs. "Let's see ..."

Gem transferred into box via very long tongs. Box closed, boxed again, then boxed again, then boxed again. Six boxes total, and every one was a different shape and had a different number of sizes and angles, but when Selvig picked it up with the tongs and set it down on the reader it didn't rattle at all.

Selvig poked the machine's on switch with a reader, cringing in advance of the distress siren that'd happened the last time they tried to test the container.

Nothing. Loki shook his head when they glanced at him. Nothing there either.

"I think we can call that a success," Selvig said, wiping sweat from his forehead. "Now how do we get the other ones out?"

Loki smirked over his folded arms. "Oh, I certainly could, if you were to trust me with such an artifact. My, my. I wonder what Thor would think?" curling satisfaction.

Clint exchanged glances with Nat.
Answering that was way, way, way above their pay grade. He thumbed his comm.

"Let's find out."
Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

Terrible bedtime stories.

Of the various things he'd been expected to do with his super-soldier reflexes, agility and speed, sneaking past a sleeping, Mjolnir-hugging Thor to take the solidified magic shield containing the Infinity Gauntlet without being noticed was probably the one with the most potential for humiliation.

Banner, of course, was trying not to laugh, alert despite the darkness under his eyes and so very unhelpful. He kept moving his mouth like he was talking and it kept taking Steve several frozen, awful seconds to realise he wasn't actually saying anything.

Making it out of the tent with the gauntlet stuffed under his shirt was a relief. Sprinting like hell to the rendezvous point was even better.

It was a roughly-fenced twenty by thirty foot patch of desert, twenty kilometers out from the tent and almost twenty-five from the SHIELD base.

Waiting inside the fence and sitting on plastic chairs under a large umbrella were Agents Barton and Romanova, Loki, Doctor Selvig, and Tony, who waved and offered coffee, though from the smell it was heavily doctored.

"Oh, you got it, you delicious creampuff, I like you," Tony said, and Agent Romanova smiled at Steve. "But yeah, so, we're all here because Argue-Argue here says he can pop the gems out, but if it goes wrong and he kills everybody or, like, destroys the universe, it's legally not our fault and I don't think anybody wants to be out of ground zero because if any of us survive, Fury will fucking kill us, and that'll be worse than having his beady eye watching everything we do right now, because that was one of the conditions and I don't like it. Okay? Everybody clear on that?"

"I have boxes," Selvig said. "This is very risky."

"I have guns," Romanova said.

"I have booze!" Tony announced. "Shall we? The risk is part of the fun, doc, get with the program. So, Argue-Argue, you're up. Get popping. Is it like bubblewrap?"

Loki looked around at all of them, and to Steve he looked very startled. "You truly --? But you cannot know what I will do."

"Well, duh," Agent Barton said. "Call it one of those trust exercise things. How about we take you at your word that all you'll do is pop them out into the boxes and that's it? And then you prove us right?"

"That is very predictable," Loki murmured, not moving from the chair.

"Not for you," Romanova said.

Steve sat down next to Loki, putting down his shield and bracing his forearms on his knees. "Loki?"
Loki tipped his head toward Steve, but his eyes were still downcast, and his fingers twisted in his lap. "Yes?"

"Could you do this for us?" Loki jerked, and Steve bent to catch his eye. "It's really important. I bet you don't want anyone getting hold of it either."

Tony slurped coffee. "Yeah, no, I mean, Asgard's out, all of us are out, Thanos dude is out, we don't want it, we don't want them to have it, and it's still a fucking beacon, so either way it's getting taken apart. You're not getting it either, by the way. Sound like a plan?"

Loki shook his head. "He will tear your world apart. You are taking risks you do not comprehend."

"We'll deal with that when we get there." Agent Barton tapped the table; it listed, and Steve put a hand under the edge to level it out. "Look, I don't think you give much of a shit about Earth except that you're here for the moment. But if you could, you know, buy us a bit of time, that'd be great."

"Thor will --"

"I'm not worried about Thor," Steve said, interrupting as firmly as he could. "I'm worried about you."

Loki laughed. "What cause have you to worry? You are pathetic, Captain Rogers."

Steve tried to catch his eye again, and it took some silent, stubborn glaring before Loki relented and looked back at him, mouth pinched in a sulk. "Please, Loki."

He shrank back, startled. "What?"

Steve held steady. "I'm asking you, Loki. You won't be punished. You won't be rewarded either. This is up to you. I'm asking. Will you please take the gems out of the glove, put them in their boxes, and help Selvig seal them?"

"Say it again. Beg me, beg for your salvation," Loki snarled, half-wild, half-caught, glaring around at all of them for evidence Steve was lying -- but they'd all agreed on this before. They couldn't keep rewarding Loki when they couldn't give punishments he would even understand as punishments, and they couldn't keep using his children against him and still -- and this was mostly Steve -- feel like they were better off than Asgard.

A selfish impulse, but there it was on Loki's face, the startlement and fear.

Steve wouldn't be surprised if it was the first time someone ever let Loki make a decision without loading risk and reward like he'd never be able to choose for himself without being forced one way or the other.

"I'm not begging. We can figure it out ourselves, I'm sure, but I'd prefer not to lose too much time. I'm asking. Will you please do this?"

Loki blinked, huge-eyed. "What? You mock me, you foolish, foolish mortal, you will pay, I will make you suffer --"

"Come on, Argue-Argue, we wouldn't do that --"

He stormed away, tearing through the fence like paper, and Steve was ready to run after him if he had to but Loki stopped less than a mile away and sank to his haunches, head bowed deep.
"So ... Stark," Agent Barton said. "You owe me ten."

Tony groaned and handed over the money.

Steve would be more annoyed by the bet if he weren't so concerned. "Should I --"

"Go on, Cap," Romanova said, and distributed pulpy juice from a flask. "We've got time."

He picked up the shield and held it at rest, not combat; he figured it was a good middle between not having it and offending Loki with the assumption that he wouldn't hurt Steve and raising it and offending Loki with the assumption that he'd attack over something like this. He approached him carefully, swinging around to walk up to his side, and sat down with maybe three feet between them.

Quiet, desolate desert air hung around them, and the sun prickled Steve's shoulders through his shirt. He pulled the umbrella out of his pocket, unfolded it, and held it over Loki's head.

"What will you give me if I refuse?"

"Nothing," Steve said.

"If I accept?"

"Nothing."

Loki blew out a breath. "And if I do nothing at all? If I allow your wretched friends to wait 'til the sun rots beyond your reckoning before I will move from this very spot?"

"Well, you'd get awfully hungry." Steve squinted into the distance. "It's a choice too, though."

"It changes nothing whether I do or not." Loki lifted his head. "The placement of the gems does not matter to me."

"Matters to us. It'd be handy if we could make sure no-one was affected while we figure out what to do about Thanos. Are you more scared of him than the commander?"

A dry chuckle drifted to Steve's ears. "You are naive. Thanos is Death's consort, and I do not, this time, speak in metaphor. The ideal that is Death whispers in his ear, and he seeks to sacrifice all he can to their pleasure. Thus his desire to possess the gauntlet."

"Infinite power, right?"

"When assembled it is a weapon not of destruction, but unmaking," Loki said after a long silence. "To have this existence no longer is a great temptation. Thanos does not know I took it; as as all but your friends and our illustrious Gatekeeper know, it yet remains in Asgard."

"And your brother."

Loki sounded tired. "I have many crimes to answer. What is one more act of treason?"

Steve felt for him, in a way. "You really can't go home, can you?"

"I have no home," Loki said. "There is nowhere for me. No sanctuary, no refuge, no protection. The wrath of Asgard is all-seeing and ever merciless. The wrath of Odin One-Eyed, Odin All-Father, is fearsome indeed. The Wandering, the Furious, the Deceiver -- thy name is Odin, and he is ever watchful of those whom might stand against his decree." Loki chuckled, but it was strained and lost. "I am ever a disappointment."
"Sounds like Thor got his temper," Steve observed.

Loki studied his hands, curling his fingers in the sand and leaving little furrows. "Yes. They are alike, and warriors both. Neither yield easily, or at all, and yet someone must for there to be a victory. I gave him Sleipnir," he said. "I offered my son. I wanted him to praise my intelligence. My devotion."

Steve stared at his profile. "You gave him away?"

"As a gift to my king. I asked that he be treated well, for I had done well in my turn, had I not? I knew nothing of mothering, only of my father's elusive pride."

Eight, Steve reminded himself. Eight. It made sense for an eight-year-old. "Did he ... was he good to him?" He was afraid to ask.

"I am proud of my son. Horse he may be, but he is a warrior of great renown, and accomplished much under my father's hand. Odin was never cruel to him. I could not have hoped for better."

"That's ... that's good. That's something." On the one hand, at least Odin was capable of it. On the other hand, he treated his horse better than his son.

"Would you mourn?" Loki said, just as Steve was wondering if he should get up and go back.

"For you?" A nod. "Yeah. Yeah, I would. Loki. You have grown on me. I'd miss you. Maybe not everything about you, but you have your good points."

Loki made a strangled noise. "Why are you so kind, you foolish, ridiculous ingrate? Do you not know how vulnerable it makes you? Do you not care how easily I could strip skin from your flesh and place it unto your nightmares 'til you tore your heart free from your chest, begging an end to your horrors from a throat so raw you cannot even whimper?"

He was on his feet now, shouting down at Steve, tears rolling down his face and fists clenched, voice raised and sliding in the air like a freshly sharpened knife.

"I would, if there were but reason, and I have not decided there is not. You are a creature of nothing but nostalgia gone to seed and failing to sprout anew, and yet you place yourself in my hands, mine, these hands," gesturing wildly, "these hands of monstrous deeds and unforgiveable flesh, these hands with which I could tear your head from your shoulders and stuff it of your offal, mount it upon a pike, and display the consequences of your clinging, noisesome amity. I am a god, mortal."

He paced off, breathing hard and quivering distress. "I do not understand why you do this. You are nothing but a pestersome, insolent varlet -- nay, you are not even that. You are as nothing. Nothing, nothing at all would have you as family; I vow not even the greediest eagle would claim your blood as feed. You are as filth. You are all of you beneath me."

Steve waited a minute to see if he was going to say anything more, then sighed and got up, brushing off his slacks and coming to stand beside Loki and raising the umbrella again.

"I will not have your mockery. I will not have it," quiet and desperate. "I will not."

"I can't make you believe I'm not mocking you. I don't want to make you. All I can do is hope one day you'll believe me when I say I'm not." He turned and opened his arms to him, holding them there. "This isn't mocking you either. I just think maybe you could use one right now."

Loki considered him, then leaned a stiff shoulder against his chest, hands pressed tightly against his
own stomach, his cheek barely a chill through Steve's shirt. He flinched when Steve's arm came up around him, but relaxed in slow, slow degrees when Steve held still.

His hair smelled like ice and smoke.

"Ask me again."

Steve nodded against his scalp. "Would you please help us, Loki?"

He leaned a little more, nestling in a tiny, uncertain shuffle that broke Steve's heart. "I accept."

"Thank you," Steve said, too relieved to hide it.

He felt Loki laugh against him, the motion of it in his body all wrong compared to a human one, but he recognised the sound. "You are too easy."

"You're not the first to say that. How ... how close is the commander?"

Loki twitched something that might've been a shrug. "Not long. Less than one of your days. Their voices are so loud. They whisper of pain and longing, and how I will burn for their vengeance. They are bent on my suffering, and think of nothing else. I like it very much."

Steve touched his hair, listening for the hum of permission, and when he got it he stroked it slowly, careful not to get tangled in the wavy ends. "That's not very healthy, I think."

"You accuse me of soundness?" wry. "You still forget who I am. No, it will take strength and will to defeat the commander, and for the moment I have none. I would rather live a thousand years in their care than face Odin again, and if that is the choice I must make, so be it."

"We won't let you go without a fight."

"It is as well." Lok shook him off like an irritated cat, mussing his hair. "Your death will amuse me."

Steve knew enough by now to take that as a twisted sliver of affection. "Time to go back?"

"Yes." Loki brushed himself off and fell into step with him, easily pacing Steve. "How is it you tolerate me? I did murder a realm and you have history to deepen your disapproval, yes?"

"I'm not unfamiliar with genocide, exactly," Steve said after he'd recovered from his stumble. "But I'm part of the Avengers. They're people who've done terrible things and they know that some of them there's just no atoning. It's part of why they can be Avengers. I couldn't be here if I couldn't compromise enough to accept that."

"Ohh." He felt Loki's rapacious amusement, and concentrated on facing forward. "Can you? Can you compromise?"

Steve twitched a smile, more bitter than he'd ever want to show, but it slipped through. "It's a new world," half-ironic. "I have to."

"I am not an Avenger, nor will I be," very sly. "And I have no redeeming qualities."

"Loki, most of the time ..." He tried to find words. "Most of the time I just want to sleep. It's all I've wanted for a long time. A man can accept a lot if it means he can get some rest once in a while."

"There is a tale told on Asgard of the frost giants, and one of Frigga's favourites to recount to me when I was a child. It is said they captured an Aesir child, and wanted to sacrifice it to some dark
purpose. But the time had to be right, and they must wait. The child was beautiful, the most beautiful of the realms, and a very clever child, too, with a great plan, and very sure of it they were, too. The child thought to escape, to creep forth on their soft little feet and run away, for the wilderness was surely better than being the prisoner of those wicked creatures."

Steve glanced at Loki, but he was staring as resolutely ahead as Steve had earlier, tone very conversational as he went on.

"The child planned to take advantage of the giants' sleep, and pass them as they slumbered. They stayed very still and very quiet, and waited. They waited, and waited, and waited. They waited a frostdark and frostdark, and thrice again, but the giants did not sleep, did not need rest as Aesir, for their minds were not well enough to need respite from thought. Thus they danced and sang their brutish chants to the earth, and the child grew tired, so very tired. 'I must not sleep, they said; I must not sleep, for I must escape. I must not allow myself to be caught unawares, I must be awake.' The child tried very hard, and thrice again frostdark passed through their little hut of ice."

"One, three, three -- a week? She was awake for a week?"

Loki smiled. "Seven days they tried, that clever, most beautiful child. But when the stars aligned and the frozen land returned their song, they brought forth the sleeping child and took them as a woman whilst they yet did not wake, so exhausted were they, and when their seed was spent and the rituals of rude magic inscribed, slit their throat. And that, Loki my son, is why you should sleep when you are told."

Steve tripped over his feet in shock, and Loki turned to him, half-smiling.

"It is true Jotun do not sleep as they do in Asgard. It is a property of the light, I think."

"How could she?" he exclaimed, scrambling for a balance that wasn't spinning, inarticulate horror.

"How could she -- didn't she know?"

"Oh, yes. She knew. My query is this, Captain: are you that child? Do you fear to die as you sleep? To pass into oblivion without ever knowing this time it be true -- frightening, is it not? Yet if you never rest, you will be the child of the tale: so beautiful, so clever, so, so very unwise. I do not envy your dilemma."

Steve put his hands to his face, shaking, and if he took one more step he was going to throw up, chest constricting in familiar long-ago tightness. "Stop."

Loki sauntered on, trailing cruel laughter. "You are not asking."
Chapter 60

Chapter Notes

60 chapters and yesterday was the first day I missed in my daily update schedule. Not too bad! Don't worry, I just took a bit of a turn for the worse and was too tired to read over what I'd written. Onwards and upwards.

Discussion of suicide.

Bruce yawned, checked his blood pressure, and went to make another cup of coffee. Sweet, sweet coffee. Sweet, sweet drug dependency.

"Doctor."

"Yeah?" He turned around, realising Thor was the only other one in the tent. "Oh, hey, hi."

Thor was sitting up, rubbing his eyebrows, and he had to clear his throat a few times before enough of his voice rose out of subsonics to be understandable. "Have I slept overlong?"

"A while, yeah." Bruce poured himself some sludge and took it back across the room. Watching Thor with Loki might've swayed him a little, but he still didn't want to get closer to him than he had to. "Tony said you had a, uh, pretty rough conversation."

He got to his feet, twisting his body in limber, vaguely military calisthenics, and after a few seconds Thor was awake, clear-eyed and all Asgard prince, not tired soldier. Bruce had to wonder sometimes if they were dealing with a commander with no army to command. Those guys got antsy as hell after a few days.

"Yes. I find I am not a good man as your world describes." Everything creaked for a squealing moment when Thor sat down, but he grimaced and lifted his elbows and the table held. "You speak of virtue and righteousness and while both are good, righteousness is for the tales that will be told after my death. I will die with honour."

Bruce put containers of leftovers in front of him. "Uh, we had dinner, we saved some. Honour's a warrior thing, right? Like, you ... die fighting?"

Thor wasn't quite looking at him. "Yes."

Well, wasn't that just predictable. "Oh, man." He couldn't help laughing and grabbing for a cloth to polish his glasses. "I guess suicide doesn't really count in the honour column, huh?"

"No. To die before one is exhausted as a warrior is shameful. I do not think you yourself shameful, only that --"

Bruce cut him off with a sharp wave. "No, no, that's not -- that's normal, it's very usual. I'm a, uh, suicide expert, but I haven't tried in a while, so ..." He gestured with his pen. "Sorry, I actually shouldn't've brought it up. I'm not really a warrior anyway, though. I mean, I don't count. I guess the other guy, uh, might."
Thor shoveled food into his mouth. "My father," garbled through pasta and a quickly-crunched slice of cucumber. "We spoke of many things in my childhood, of magic, your science, and tales, and how a king should be. I am not above my people; to think so only hastens my fall. I have learned so. Yet a king is above, and none may yoke his whims."

"That's a fairly standard double-bind, yeah." Bruce poured a liter of OJ into a stein and pushed it at Thor, who took it with a nod. "So, uh, you're ... having second thoughts?"

"No. I must be king." He set down the stein and looked very fierce. "There is no other avenue. Once my father yields, I shall be be crowned, and I shall reign as King of Asgard."

Bruce kind of felt like Tony, poking where everyone said he shouldn't. It was a lot of fun, actually. Maybe a bit mean-spirited, but Bruce wasn't ... nice. He'd never been nice. "We have a theory about that, actually. Says your dad won't give it up."

Thor leaned in, confused. "Either he will resign, or it will pass to me upon his death. This is the way of succession."

"Yeah, okay, but ... if you have to die in battle, and you don't, uh, have one for him, but he's not past it yet, isn't that a bit -- complicated?"

"It has ever been the grief of our warriors that my father holds to peace," Thor said. "Skirmishes barely satisfy glory, but for the moment they are enough. Though no skirmish would satisfy my father, and thus, he will resign. He grows wearisome. My brother's follies have aged him. I wish him peace 'til his glory at the last."

Bruce didn't bother holding in all the giggles. "Yeah, see, uh, our other problem, don't you have to make a battle happen for, um, Odinworthy glory? I -- I just don't see it ending well."

The thing about Steve was, the man had a funny streak a mile fucking wide. But he kept it pent up with them until they'd managed to concoct something he could drink without pissing like a racehorse every ten minutes, and commented when Barton raised the same point with *I kept punching Hitler and he kept showing up. There's just no accounting for some.*

Odin was going to have to show up. Collectively realising that was when they'd had to rescue Tony from the rum he'd snorted up his nose.

"I ... well ..." Thor floundered, then scowled defensively. "You find my predicament amusing?"

Bruce shook his head, pushing his glasses up his nose to hide his smile. "Uh, no, no, I just, I -- it's not a good situation. But hey, you don't have to worry for a while, right?"

Thor was still suspicious. "I should think not."

"You don't really like us very much, do you? You're all benevolent, but I get the impression that's not really ... meaningful," Bruce raised an eyebrow, letting the coffee roll in his mouth. It was overbaked, burnt, and terrible. It was perfect.

"You are all so disrespectful and concerned with such mortal pettiness," Thor said. "I find it both endearing and irritating." He leaned his cheek on his fist and sighed. "Though you recommend yourselves with cleverness and great spirit."

He chewed the inside of his cheek. "But still, uh, puny mortals."
"You, too, do not like me," Thor said, very even, and weirdly diplomatic. Bruce hazarded a guess that Thor had a hell of a lot of impulses to control, too; flipping tables like that didn't happen outside of being the alternative to killing things. He got the impression killing things was usually Thor's first option.

"Yeah, no, I don't." Bruce shrugged and picked at the box Thor had tasted and rejected, wiping down the handles of one of Tony's pliers and using it as cutlery. "I don't really get on well with, uh, authority figures. They like the other guy a bit too much."

Thor creased his eyebrows. "I would not use you so."

Bruce grimaced. "I wish that was, uh, the first time I've heard that. It's nice, it's nice of you to say."

The monitor in the corner he'd been watching in his peripheral vision began to beep, very faintly, and Bruce took off his glasses and put them down, rubbing his hands together. "That's the, uh, Chitauri detector."

Thor was already on his feet, Mjolnir in hand. "They will not touch my brother."

"Okay. Uh, we kind of moved Loki. We can't actually afford to destroy the base now if the Chitarui get involved, it's ... couple hundred miles? Thataway?" He pointed, the beep becoming louder, more regular. "You might want to hurry."

"You will speak to me of how you have used my brother," Thor said through his teeth, "once I am finished with our enemy."

"Sure. After." Bruce nodded, smiled and followed him out the tent, sensor blipping in his pocket, and squinted up at the thundering sky.

Not good. Not good at all. This was going to be terrible, wasn't it, and he waited for Selvig, watching Iron Man dive overhead toward the source of the greasy chill lining his throat and nose. It was loud, whatever was happening, faint booms and impacts that were probably Mjolnir, and he kept his hands in his pockets, one on the vibrating, squealing sensor and the other on one of the consoles that controlled Loki's bracelets, slowly dropping the restrictions on Tony's orders, breathless but still wisecracking.

Selvig drove up in a buggy with some guards and they exchanged places, not even bothering to speak or take out the key, and Bruce handed over the controls to Loki's magic and made his way to the combat site, reflecting on his life and the Judas Priest cassette someone lost under the cigarette lighter.

Driving toward danger again. Alien princes and gods and insectoid threats and the other guy stirring in his mind with more approval for the lightshow than Bruce really wanted to know about. Fantastic, really.

It was a good show, though, especially as he got near -- the green flashes were definitely Loki, repulsors gold and lasers red, and the creatures in the middle of it were grey like the Chitauri but more humanoid, lightning flashing scars and chains wrapped around their arms.

"YOU WILL KNEEL BEFORE THANOS," something said, loud but not emphatic. It was all in the words, partially skipping his ears and lodging themselves into his head and strongly suggesting giving up was a very good idea.

Bruce couldn't hear what the rest of them thought about that through the comm, but he could see rain and ice and hear the roar of something that was getting really, really pissed off.
He levered the accelerator a little more, steering past dunes and coughing sand and wondering if Living After Midnight was a good song choice -- two in the morning barely counted, but it was on the clock. Maybe it could be a playlist. Riskay was definitely on there somewhere; Smell Yo Dick was the anthem of Hulking out. There were pictures. Some even had captions.

It’d have to be a randomised playlist. The middle was harder to figure out. Something for everyone. Romanova was probably Russian punk, and Tony's had to be Bowie. No alternatives. Loki was old church hymns, not the gospel kind but the solemn cathedral ones about the Old Testament. Thor was definitely some sort of overproduced pop song that had its own catchy dance moves, and Steve ... Steve was harder. Some sort of action movie soundtrack. Johnny Got His Gun in musical composition.

Bruce himself? Bruce's was Sinnerman, of course. Sinnerman, where you gonna run to? Sinnerman, where you gonna run to? Sinnerman, where you gonna run to, all on that day?

He wasn't running now even though the air boiled and froze and distant shockwaves rattled the suspension, green and gold and white shooting to the sky like fireworks, Tony's reactor briefly lighting Thor's cape and a circle of slithery grey fangs dripping venom.

Sometimes Bruce was a little stupid, and a little cowardly, and a hell of a lot cynical, yet here he was, tooling along at 220 km/hr and still at least half an hour away by car. Ten, maybe five minutes by Hulk, but he was driving up as himself into the middle of all that. Very stupid. Bruce was very stupid.

But not so stupid as to let out the other guy yet. Bruce was pretty sure he still didn't differentiate Loki as 'maybe not entirely an enemy at the moment', and explaining why he'd turned him into another smear and basically handed him giftwrapped to Thanos because the other guy was very, very bad at distinctions was a conversation he'd avoid if he could. It would just be awkward. So awkward.

That last flash of green, jagged and accompanying a roar of lightning and the kind of howl Bruce associated with 80s monster movies, was maybe a little alarming. A little, as in he might've cringed at the lightning strikes that followed.

Romanova and Barton were in that mess too, and there was a good chance whatever snake-pet-thing that'd just exploded into frothy fireworks was going to crush them in its death throes and the Captain along with them.

Bruce eased the accelerator down a little more and avoided a broken fang taller than a three-story building, humming to himself. He was so calm. It was so nice. He was going to have some popcorn when he got back. He'd put honey and chilli on it and watch Tony reach for it over and over and make grossed out faces every time he forgot it was Bruce's.

"So, you know, if you're interested while you're hanging out for drive-through or whatever, we're winning," Tony reported. "The commander's fucking tough, though, I don't even know what he's made of but it's better than fucking teflon and I already fucking hate teflon."

Bruce couldn't help laughing. "I'll just, uh, if you need me to suit up when I get there --"

"Uh, actually, scratch the winning bit, hang on -- fuck, that looks like it hurts. Thor just got, like, his leg ripped off, I don't think it likes the hammer much."

"What's Loki doing?" He couldn't imagine Loki taking all that well to someone seriously hurting Thor; the kid didn't strike him as the kind to actually want his brother dead, just make him think he was going to do it himself for kicks.
Tony's cackle came through over the comm. "He's pissed. Oh, is he pissed. It's beautiful. Isn't it beautiful?"

Bruce had to admit the roar of that much power, spiking and melding and throwing open the sky to whirls of blue fire, was gorgeous. Flashy, but gorgeous.

Sixty percent available to him and he could do that, and that was a bit of a worry. Either he was good at using whatever he had, or they just hadn't a clue what 'the most powerful sorcerer of Asgard' actually meant in the real world.

They were definitely getting the idea now.

But it sputtered and faded, draining down, and white flashed to the horizon, flooding Bruce's eyes. He blinked away stinging black spots, trying to drive with a hazy little bit of peripheral vision. "What happened?"

"Loki gave up or something," Tony said, sounding distracted. "I dunno, they're talking or something, oh, shit, Thor, no, no, don't, fuck!"

Lightning roared from the sky, and Bruce felt the ground shake and wished he'd remembered sunglasses as a shockwave of dust and sand hammered the car, bits of shattered something-or-other clanging against the windshield.

"KNOW PAIN."

There was a thin scream, a flash of pale blue, and the horizon abruptly cut into black, blinding Bruce and forcing him to slow a little to let his eyes adjust before he hit something. "Tony? What happened?" Silence. "Tony?"

"We have achieved," Romanova said, exhaling with the crackle of punctured lungs, "commander tartare."
Chapter Notes

Warning for gender essentialism and extremely gory and unscientific Asgard medicine.

Operative status: broken rib, punctured lung, two sprained fingers, concussion, bruises. Conclusion: functional.

Natasha shouldered rocks off her back and flipped on a torch, getting to her feet when it revealed no potential rockslides or traps. That was good. On the other hand she'd been thrown into the wall of a fresh crater about twelve meters high and blood was trickling down the walls from above. Less good.

"Anybody read?" She ventured further in, gun at the ready, and whipped the torch around when she heard a groan, focusing on a pinkish smear.

But it wasn't a smear, it was Thor.

Bits of bone crunched under her feet as she approached, the torch showing her the damage bit by bit. The leg with its boot still attached, meters from Thor. The loop of pulsing intestine, caked with dirt and spilling from a mass of organs that weren't quite anything she'd seen on a corpse before. The left side of his body was destroyed to the waist, the arc of his pelvis glistening as she passed it. Ribs heaved, white and peaky above a lurid mass of shredded, trodden flesh, and blood pumped sluggishly from his shoulder, soaking the cape brown. "Thor?"

"Milady."

He was still talking. He was still breathing.

She held in pity and moved to his side, checking for concussion. None. He was lucid, breathing, talking, and unless a miracle happened, he was about to die, his pulse so slow and faint she could barely feel it.

"Just hold on, Thor. Anyone read?" into her comm. "We've got someone seriously hurt."

There was a broken noise just a little ahead, and she glanced from it to Thor, then patted his arm and got up. "I'll be right back. "She saw him nod and blink, face contorting into confusion as his hand groped his sticky liver, more organs sliding out of his body and plopping to the ground.

She saw green and white. Loki, the torch told her, from the remains of his face, and while he had all of his limbs, there was nothing on his back and legs but ribcage, bone scored like something big had clawed it, and his spine was in pieces.

One arm had no flesh on it, just bone and bits of tendon, and she almost slipped on a piece of glistening skin as long as her leg.

"Can you talk?"

She scrambled back to Thor, trying the comm again and finding no-one, and searched his chest for whatever powder it was she was supposed to find. He squinted at her and fumbled with a buckle, and she unstrapped it to find a sack of some sort of silky leather. "This it?"

He nodded, face twisting in pain, and weakly flicked his fingers.

"I'll be right back. Okay? I'll be right back. Stay awake." She knelt back at Loki's side, trying not to look at the staved-in skull, the shiver of his brain as he tried to move, unwrapping the leather and finding stones and coloured pouches. "What do I do with this? Loki, wake up. I need you to stay awake. What do I do with these?"

"Blue. My back."

Natasha opened the blue pouch and upended it over Loki's back, covering her mouth as it shimmered and drifted and his bones started writhing like tentacles.


She shifted the torch to see him working up something through his mouth, and she put her hand forward to catch it. It had the colour and texture of a communion wafer, and she gave him a puzzled look that he couldn't see, not with the vitreous dripping down his face.

"Eat it," he said. "It is magic. A sliver. Eat."

Natasha hesitated, considered her responsibilities and the risks, then swallowed it down. It melted on her tongue, bitterly cold, and she gasped in shock as it flew through her body, lighting nerves and brightening her eyes to blue-shifted night vision, and she could breathe, suddenly, and it didn't hurt. The bone was still in her lung, but it didn't hurt. Some kind of pain reliever; unexpectedly thoughtful of Loki, but everything about this was unexpected. "What do I do?"

"Some assistance, mortal." She saw the reaching, fumbling core of the spine still attached to his body, like it was searching for something, and she gingerly touched the bits to each other, steadying them as they attached with wet slurps and twitched under her hand, lighting blue as she touched them, coming alive and trying to join themselves together. Bit by bit, until it was whole and sinking into a wriggling mass of pinking flesh, blood pooling and sinking as she shoved his ribs into place and held together a broken shoulderblade. She pressed and held and pressed and held until fat bubbled up and skin skimmed over it like a blanket and he was almost whole. Damaged, but it was the kind of damage survivable by a human.

Loki cried out once, and only once, but she could hear him weeping. "Take me to Thor. Now."

She took his arm, the other still mostly bone, sluggishly healing but nowhere near fast enough, and heaved him to his knees, torch clenched between her teeth to light the way.

"Thor," Loki said when the light wobbled over his corpse, or almost-corpse. She didn't understand how he was still breathing, why he was alive, and she tried the comm again and sank to her knees next to both of them, Loki flopping his hand onto Thor's chest.

"No need, brother," Thor whispered. "I go to Valhalla."

She flinched to her feet before Loki even finished snarling. "How unlucky, then, that I hate you."

Green mist rose and sank into Thor's chest, but she couldn't see any improvement. "Woman, fetch his leg."

Natasha fetched it, boot bumping against her hip as she ran back, and Loki pulled it to him and
wrenched at the fat at the top, bone sawn through, marrow pink and dribbling, yanking at the flesh and putting it in his mouth.

She felt sick, swallowing blood. "What are you --"

"Will you help?" Loki snapped, unsuccessfully trying to pull off the bit in his mouth, and she saw most of his teeth were shattered.

"Ever ... arcane, brother."

"He's done this before?" she said, kneeling and pulling a knife to saw off bits and pieces. She didn't really understand what was happening, but Loki seemed determined, and she felt him lick at her fingers, blindly sucking his brother's flesh into his mouth, and tried to hold in the shudder.

"Angrboda," Thor said, and chuckled weakly. "Do not ... have my babe, brother. I vow our father would not be ... pleased."

"Your father, not mine," Loki snapped, pulling meat from his mouth, and it was slivered in rotten green, dripping with it, and he smeared it across Thor's shoulder until he found Thor's mouth and pushed it in. "By all means, intensify my hate of you. Eat, you thrice-cursed oaf."

Thor gagged but swallowed, and opened his mouth again. The blood was staunching somehow, no longer bleeding, and she cut off more chunks and fed them to Loki, passing them to Thor when he opened his mouth, letting her pick the masticated flesh off his tongue. His breath was hot and shallow, and his eyes were closed, jelly peeling slowly down his face and dripping into the ruin of his cheekbone.

Thor's bones were regrowing, slowly, and she felt like she should be breathing more than she was, the air syrupy slow when she tried to suck it in. "Are you doing that?"

"Yes. I am slowing your wretched Midgard time for the oaf's benefit." He spat a tooth. "Do not distract me."

That explained why she couldn't raise anyone, then. She had to hope they would be all right, though she was a little curious how much time had actually passed -- from the flash still lingering in the sky not long at all, perhaps not even a second.

"Oh, my brother," Thor murmured. "Brother."

Loki's spit, green and shining, dribbled into her hand when she took back the fresh piece of meat. "I am not your brother either," he said waspishly. "Fool."

Thor licked meat from her fingers, chewing and swallowing, and the flesh of his thighs started to rebuild itself, growing in a way that looked very, very painful, painful enough to make Thor scream.

"Do hush," Loki said irritably, and the drool had a yellowish tinge this time.

Thor stopped screaming when he took it into his mouth, forcing his teeth open around the pained rictus, and he sagged with an explosive breath once he swallowed. "Are you not tired?"

Loki took meat from her mouth. "Hush," through tangled sinew, and he let it drop, breaths hotter, faster on her fingers.

"Loki --"
He twitched weakly. "Hush."

Natasha had no idea how long it took, but most of the leg was demolished, and she'd started on the calf and worked off the boot before Thor's lower half grew back, trapping enough dirt and rock for her to wince and think dark thoughts about sepsis.

"I can remove it," Loki told her, teeth fresh and soft in his mouth against her fingers. "There are things of more importance."

Thor groaned and clutched his stomach, colour slowly coming back as they stripped off the last of his calf, sitting up and coughing, wiping blood from his nose. "Brother -- brother."

Loki made protesting noises, flapping weakly in an attempt to push himself up. "Not your brother."

"Yes, I know you loathe me," Thor said, taking the satchel of powders and stones and healing Loki, arm and face regenerating, skin not quite so bloodless.

It amazed her what they could survive.

"You loathe me too," Loki muttered, kicking the ground in pain, eyeballs cohering from wobbly yellow muck that built up in his sockets until Natasha had to look away. "Go gently, you great lug."

"I'd feel better if I could use my comm," she said, grateful beyond measure that when Loki rolled his eyes to smirk at her they were intact. He still looked even more battered than after the Hulk, but it didn't give her the uneasy feeling of watching a corpse move and talk and breathe.

"They have no knowledge of your attempts."

She blinked at the immensity of what he'd just told her, and doublechecked the bracelets were still intact. They were. "You slowed it for everyone?"

"Immediate surrounds, perhaps. Some distance."

Thor smiled down at Loki, mixed exasperation and affection. "My brother is strong. The strongest magician. Stronger even than our father."

Loki waved a hand nonchalantly, bracelet glittering dully. "How you ever diminish me with faint praise. I should not expect better."

"Brother, what must I do?" Thor roared. "I intend no offense, I mean you no harm, and yet you spit upon my love for you with no quarter and no recompense for your wrongs --"

"I AM NOT YOUR BROTHER." Loki half-turned onto his side, scrabbling in the dirt as he struggled to breathe, blood pouring from the wounds he'd opened in his scream. "Would you simply stop?"

There was a long silence. "I love you as I love no other. None have meant more, or been so close. None are so dear to me. Will you believe that? No matter if you are Jotun, we have grown together as men."

Oh, no. "Thor --"

"You have seen, have you not? You have seen how I am deformed? Not a man at all, brother, not by your wish nor any other." He gave an ugly laugh and struggled to his knees. "I could show you, if
you wished, you shall see if you like, perhaps that will cease your delusions --"

"No!" Thor put his hand down with a grimace. "I know of your accursed form. I cannot claim to know why you refuse Eir's healing. You are a man, brother, I believe so. It matters not your shape."

Loki made a low noise that could've been a laugh or a sob, his head hanging low, bits of grey flesh hanging off the ends of his hair. "And if it did? What then?"

"You know of my support for Sif," Thor said into the quiet, fists clenched. "Ever has she been accused, and ever have I defended her. Too have I defended your manhood, as my brother and prince of Asgard, our father's son, despite your womanly arts. How dare you accuse me otherwise? I have done my best by you, however you perceive it, and yet you -- I am done. Enough. Enough, brother."

Thor staggered to his feet, clutching his sides, and Loki twisted to meet his eyes. She saw grief there, but also a dark, spreading satisfaction. "What would you do, brother?"

"I would have you end this spell. I will not have you endanger the world I love a moment longer."

Loki closed his eyes. "You mean to take me to Asgard."

"Eir and our mother will heal you of your madness. You should never have been allowed to grow so strange. Too long have you evaded their wishes. End your magics."

"I suppose it would be simpler. What more have I now to fear?" The ghost of a smile, the flick of fingers, and the boom surprised her. She looked up at the wash of green and blue into black and how the world jolted, how air felt like air again, then down at Loki, who was watching her with something like fascination. "Disturbed, mortal?"

"I've seen worse," she told him, and got up, gingerly prodding her side. It wasn't the scenery that disturbed her, or her vomit streaked with pale green that slithered to Loki's fingertips and faded there, or the renewed pain, but how calm Loki was, how resigned.

"Tony?" came through her comm, and she thumbed it, picking bits of flesh out of her suit and answering Banner. She was glad he hadn't come -- they'd never managed to get enough space for the clear shot Hulk needed.

"We have achieved," and damnit, punctured lungs hurt, "commander tartare."

He chuckled. "Oh. Oh, good. Do you need, uh, you don't sound so good."

She watched Thor stomp off, wearily pantsless, and start digging through shifting rubble. "Medical assistance would be appreciated."

"Ow, fuck, seconded," Stark said. "Ow. Goddamnit, it threw me like ten miles out. Everybody okay?"

"Do we sound fucking okay?" Clint said, and she let out a breath of relief. He wouldn't sound so openly aggrieved if he was seriously injured.

Cap grabbed Thor's hand and let himself be heaved out of the hole, blinking and looking away with an uncomfortable cough. "We're ... alive." He sounded surprised, and he picked at the back of his glove. "Is that?"

"Commander tartare," Stark said. "I like that. Hey, Loki, can you hear me, see if he can hear me, I
got an announcement to make."

Loki rolled his eyes at her. "Yes," she reported.

"Why don't you just assume he can hear you?" Clint said. "He always does."

"But what if he doesn't and he's deprived of my scintillating charm? Like now! Loki, Loki, big fella, you're the best goddamn Argue-Argue in the world. I just want you to know that. Also we're totally keeping you, I just thought you might, like, want official notice."

"Yeah, nice moves, dude."

Cap smiled at Loki. "It was impressive. Are you all right?"

Natasha watched Loki's face change from patient endurance to outright shock to a sort of bitter almost-affection.

"I am, Captain."

"Yeah, no, no, you're not," Stark said through the comm. "Your life signs are fucking screwy, I'm giving you ninety percent, don't make me regret it."

Loki twitched a smile with that same mix and slowly got to his feet, wounds sealing and his cheekbone popping into an arc, filling out the skin above it. She wasn't surprised when he dug into his own body and drew out handfuls of dirt and flesh, shaking them off and pulling out more through his skin. He had to get it out somehow, of course, but it was fascinating to see how easily he handled it.

"Is that what you did for Stark's chest?"

"Yes." He tugged a long, curling spiral of metal out of his thigh, marked as part of the commander's whip by how it twitched and sparked. "Thor, come here."

Thor was scowling, but he stood still as Loki reached into him and yanked out dirt and dust and blood, shaking it to the ground and taking more, working from his chest to both of his legs. "Thank you."

Loki sneered. "Do not. You," he said to her, and beckoned imperiously. She raised an eyebrow and stepped forward, and his hand went through her skin to her ribs.

She stiffened as he twisted her rib back into place, pins and needles more painful than she'd ever felt, even after that time she'd spent two solid days on stakeout behind a box barely wider than her head, but when he let go nothing hurt, and it wasn't just some kind of painblocker -- it actually didn't hurt.

"How desperate are you, to cling to life so keenly after so long?" he whispered to her, ragged and bright-eyed and so powerful it hurt to look at straight on, and she felt his fingers twitch inside her. The intimacy of it made her skin crawl. "How can you, when it means so little?"

"I find people I want to care about," she told him. "And I stay by them until they die."

His gaze sharpened, his hand sliding, sliding, until she felt it wrap around her throat from the inside. "Not until you do?"

Natasha twitched a smile back. He could crush her to death like this, easy as a twitch, a prayer, a spasm. No-one would ever know how until they did the autopsies. The perfect excuse, and no-one
watching had realised yet, trusting her or Loki or both, maybe too much.

"I'm useful yet." She held his eyes, unafraid. "If you want a place here, we'll arrange it. We haven't treated you too badly so far, and you've given us plenty of evidence to tighten the leash if we wanted. Don't pretend if you go with him it's for our good. You're not that altruistic."

"No." He grinned, teeth sheeted with flaking blood. "How would you keep me? Your pet monster? A thrall to your charms?"

She shrugged. "However you want. You're handy in a tight spot."

He let go, stepping back with hooded eyes. "I don't recommend arguing with Thor."

"I don't think we will. You'll have to speak for yourself on this one."

Loki twitched something like a laugh. "Perhaps."

"Agent Romanova?"

Cap was watching them with raised eyebrows. She didn't bother playing it off or making excuses, just turned to him. Supersoldier hearing and smarts would've put it together already. "Yeah, Cap?"

"You all right?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. Guys?" into her comm. "How're you doing?"

"I'll be there in a minute," Banner said. "There's just, uh, a lot of wreckage, it's a bit dangerous."

"Get used to it, doc, you'll be driving us back." Clint groaned and she looked up at the torch on the other side of the pit. "Okay, which of you fuckers made the crater?"

"Crater?"

"Yeah, it's a regular goddamn meteor strike. I'm just saying, someone's going to have to fill it in, and that means someone has to report to Fury about this."

"I'm copyediting," she said.

He whistled. "Sometimes I love not being you, you know that?"

Cap put his hands on his hips, looking around and scrubbing gore off his face. "I ... I guess that went well."

"You're fine, right? You're not, like, manfully bearing up under a dozen broken bones so you can be all Romeo later, right? 'cause that would just be a total douche move and I wanna do that, you can't have my move."

"No, Tony," Cap said, picking up his shield. "I'm fine."

"Oh, good. I wasn't worried. But okay, that's good. Brucie, you mind picking me up on your way in? I'm like ... ten degrees your left. I'm kinda stuck, okay, this sand shit is giving me hives, who thought sand was a good idea, I mean, seriously. Ow. God dudes okay? Last I saw they were kinda shredded."

"All better now," she said, watching Thor put his hand on Loki's arm and Loki flinch back with a mutter. "Physically."
There was the putter of an engine approaching and stopping, and Banner leaned over the ridge. "Uh, hey. Guys. Uh ... hi. I couldn't find any more rope in the car. You might have to boost up."

"I've got some," Clint said, and a thin line snaked over the edge. "Come on, Nat."

Natasha climbed up, brushing herself off at Banner's incredulous look. "You look, uh ..."

"Like I'm covered in alien bug guts?"

"Yeah, that," he said. "You should see, uh, Tony," hooking a thumb over his shoulder, and she squinted into the headlights to find Stark sprawled on the boot, hugging his helmet, armour so dented his feet stuck out over the bumper.

"I feel better now," she said, not bothering to hide a smile.

Stark glared. "I'm flipping you off in spirit."

Loki and Thor hopped up easily, but Cap needed a hand from both of them to get to his feet, and they piled into the buggy in a tight squeeze. It was easier without Thor, still unselfconsciously pantsless and comically serious as she told him to go to Selvig and let Fury know they would be back as soon as they could, but still uncomfortable given that most of them were in rags.

Banner had the grace to lend Thor his spare trousers and Loki the shirt, and that hitched Loki's radiated temperature from 'instant frostbite' to 'a/c on full blast' and let them get in the buggy without their fingers falling off.

Clint took the front passenger seat and Loki curled up in a corner of the back, knees tucked under the shirt and the tails pulled over his feet, leaving just enough room for Cap to squeeze in on the other side. She was sprawled in the footwell, leaning against the empty bit of seat and generally content to leave watching out for impending crisis to Clint.

Natasha already had to explain to the yawning SHIELD cleaners where they had to be with only the tiniest explanation of what they were cleaning and how they might go about it. Starting off the request with "all of your on-base personnel" and working up from there hadn't improved their mood.

But they were coming, and by morning it would be put down to a very odd crop circle or perhaps just a tiny meteorite. Official story?

Training exercise.
"Are you sure you're all right?" Steve said to Loki, who was huddled with his face hidden in his knees. "What happened?"

Romanova twisted to look up at him. "A lot. He temporarily stopped time so he could save Thor from bleeding to death. I'm not sure it worked out the way he wanted it to."

"He was to hate me," Loki muttered. "I denied him Valhalla. I denied him his glory. Ever he sought worthiness in death. I took it from him, and nothing at all was different."

Steve very badly wanted to give him a jacket to cover up a little more, but he didn't have one on him at the moment. "I don't think you can make him stop loving you. Its not something you can control."

Loki huffed. "It should be. It is about me, is it not? Should I not have some say in his loathsome, irritating persistence?"

"I wish it worked that way," Steve said with feeling. "It really, really doesn't. Tony could tell you a little about that, I think."

"Stop whining, Argue-Argue," Tony said from behind them. "Wah wah, someone loves me more than anything else in the universe and I can't do anything about it. Waaaaaah, that's why my life is so hard."

Loki flared to his knees, scrambling to grip the back of the seat and twist to shout at Tony directly in his face, the ensuing argument full of curse words that definitely hadn't been popular in Steve's day.

"Now that you've distracted them," Romanova said, "what did you want to say?"

Of course she'd figured it out. Steve ventured a smile. "Why did you let him keep his hand in you? He set your ribs and fixed something, you were breathing much better, but he kept his hand in you. It was," he gestured to his collarbone, "here. You didn't seem afraid, but ..."

"No, I wasn't." She tipped her head at Loki, or more accurately at Loki's ass hanging out bare to the wind as he shouted at Tony. "Ever pulled people out of isolation, Cap? Or been there?"

He'd been in quarantine several times as a child, and bedbound more often than not, too sickly for the city air, too sickly to be held until after his mother's twice-weekly scrubdowns to get all the steel dust off her skin. Steve knew lonely.

HYDRA had introduced him to the other side of that kind of isolation, where it didn't stop at hallucinations and restlessness and shameful anger, but proceeded to create people who couldn't look at him with crying with fear, who couldn't speak unless prompted and lost their words so often it was a miracle to get a full sentence all at once. "Yes."

"Ever had them hold onto something of yours?"
A memory, then, of a man clutching the laces of his boots, rubbing his face on the knots and calling to people who weren't there in languages Steve hadn't known then. He'd translated them later -- *mother, mother, father, papa* -- and managed to piece together from the transfer paperwork to a sanitarium in Italy that he'd never stopped thinking he was still a child in Krakow and wouldn't answer to anything but a diminutive.

He wasn't the only one, but he was the one Steve remembered from the specific, repetitive request Dum Dum translated for him, "my red tram, I want my tram". It'd stuck in his head and he'd drawn it later, squashed into a convoy, rifle between his knees and Bucky asleep on his shoulder, cheek stinking of the lavender oil on his girlfriend's stationery.

Steve was better off. Toward the end of his childhood he'd had his father sitting with him in his bed, dying of pneumonia, rattling his life away and shaking Steve into coughing too. He was drunk because of the pain more often than not, and he rubbed syrups on his gums, dabbed them on his chest to sleep and sometimes put them on Steve's back when a procession kicked up smoke. He'd woken up to his father dead and thin as drumsticks, but for a year he hadn't been alone.

"Yeah. They do that sometimes." Steve rubbed his chin, trying to draw himself out of his mind and into the present. He'd need the punching bags. At least one, maybe two, before he could sleep again.

Romanova shrugged and picked at her eyelashes, rubbing clumps of dust between finger and thumb. "He needed to remember I was mortal. That there was someone he could choose to kill or not. He can't let Thor die on his watch; it doesn't matter what he feels about him, he's not in a position to."

"So he wanted control?"

"Something like that. I don't doubt the commander did more to him during the battle than he's telling us, and while I don't know how long he was isolated with the Chitauri, being able to almost kill me very efficiently served both purposes."

Steve considered her. "You're very calm," he said after a moment, trying to put into words what he found so strange about the way she handled all of this. "What he said to you -- how long have you been doing this?"

She smiled. "Longer than you, Cap. I don't remember how old I am, but it's possible I'm the oldest of us."

Which meant she'd could've been in the field fifty years or more, and Steve inclined his head respectfully. "Ma'am."

"Romanova," she said, a little stern, but she was still smiling. "It's not a problem for me. All it means is I've got some experience with these things. Maybe not alien gods, but it looks like some things stay the same. I will file for a few days off, though."

"Good idea." Steve yawned, alertness beginning to give way to fatigue, and blinked hard. "We all deserve it. Let's not come in tomorrow."

"You spend too much time with Stark."

"He spends too much time with me," Steve said, shifting his feet to give her more room. "I don't actually know why."

"Because you're too good to be true and I can't have that," Stark said.

He snorted. "Whatever you say." Steve looked up to find Loki watching him, curled on the seat and
privates thankfully covered. "Hi. Ah, I assume you healed everyone?"

"Particularly Thor," Romanova said, and Barton was hanging over the back of his seat listening to them. "He didn't look happy about it."

"I denied him entrance to Valhalla, hall of lords and eternal rest," a secretive smile full of so much hate that Steve was abruptly reminded of Red Skull. "His rightful place. He means to reign greater than our All-Father, and see no sorrow come of his reign. But a peaceful king is not an honourable king, you see."

Steve knew this play, knew it -- kingmakers, literal or not, were all the same in the end. "You're putting Thor on the throne. You want Odin to die fighting Thanos."

"It could work," Romanova said.

Barton looked like he was calculating something, timing it on his fingers. "Yeah, there's a good chance. If that was his lieutenant or whatever, and I get the impression Thanos doesn't like being shown up, then we're dealing with the kind of shit that needs gods."

Loki half-smiled. "A god's protection, no less. Perhaps that of the All-Father's. It would be a shame for the smallest to be swept away by his neglect, after all. Such a sad end to his rule. So prophetic of his decline."

Steve was a bit concerned about something else. "It has to happen here, doesn't it? How many people will die?"

"That," the same joyful secrecy, the same laughing, confiding hate, "is not my concern."

"Wow, you're a douche." Barton didn't look impressed. "You realise we live here, right? We'll be on point for whatever he invades us to do?"

"Oh, if the All-Father has any competence at all, it will not go so far." He beamed. "Do you not trust in the benevolence of your king? Do you not trust the gaze of his keeper, the swiftness of his steed, to defend your precious earth?"

Steve tried not to crumble with helplessness, and Loki was giggling at him, taking such pleasure in his inability to do anything that Steve had to turn away, blinking into the dark, a hand over his mouth.

No, Steve didn't trust, he couldn't trust -- he could never trust -- and he felt the fragile confidence he'd pulled together start to break apart.

It was all going to happen again, and there was nothing he could do to stop Thanos, nothing he could do to sway Odin, barely anything at all he could do to influence Thor, and trying to figure out if they made any difference to Loki was like spitting into the wind. He was going to be helpless, frozen in time, useless, and everyone was going to die around him again. They were against people who could get up after being ripped in half, people who shrugged off blows like they were nothing, people who'd barely worked together and still the landscape was only starting to look normal again this far out. Forty miles, maybe fifty, and they were just starting to come out of blast radius.

And neither of them had even been trying all that hard. They'd been fighting, for sure, but they'd obviously been holding back, too, defending the humans as much as they attacked, and Loki had been swinging between doing nothing, staring blankly, and screaming with a flurry of green and blue and white thrown at the commander.
And still the crater and the dust and Loki's hand inside Romanova's chest, wrist easily dipping out of view like her body and the air were all of a piece.

"We're not doubting Sleipnir," Romanova said. "Just everything else."

"Yeah, and you, you fucking asshole. You made Cap cry."

"I did not," Loki muttered, somewhere between belligerent and blustery. "Surely your precious living legend is made of sterner stuff than that."

Steve turned his face to him, letting the streaks be seen, his grief and heartbreak. "No, you did."

"Oh, Cap," and Romanova put a hand on his knee. "It's okay. It's gonna be okay."

"Captain --"

He held up a hand and Loki stopped talking. "Don't speak to me."

Steve turned back around, trying to keep it quiet, to hold in everything he'd been holding for weeks, months, maybe years. Maybe decades, decades of being trapped in the dark where he all he could do was wait and he couldn't move, couldn't breathe, couldn't think, could only feel and somehow survive in a world of nothing at all, and Loki -- Loki was going to put him back there, was clever enough to guess, and didn't care.

Expecting him not to give a shit was different from how much the threat of inevitability actually hurt. So, so different.

"Douchebag," Stark said, and he felt a heavy, armoured hand land on his shoulder. "I'll figure something out, okay? If anybody can fix this, it's me. We sure as fuck can't trust Odin to do squat, but I'll make sure he fucking does. Don't worry so much, old geezer. I'm Tony fucking Stark. Time you figured out what that means, yeah? I'll show you."

Romanova's hand tightened on his shin, and he glanced at her to see her -- devastated? Resigned? "As a team," he managed to say, and while she'd already smoothed away the dread her hand relaxed a little, so he figured he was off to a good start. "We'll figure it out together. You might be Tony fucking Stark, but we're the fucking Avengers." Steve only stumbled a little; there were ladies present, even if Romanova rejected the title as comprehensively as Peggy had.

Barton laughed. "Didn't know you had it in you, Cap. But yeah, let's work together on this. You'll need someone to run interference with Fury."

"We've almost finished working on the, uh, shield expansion," Banner said. "It's just a matter of incorporating it into the tower plans. Uh, Stark's tower ... plans. Selvig's not happy about Odin either, so."

"We're paying him enough to stick around," Barton said. "Nice little retirement fund, courtesy of SHIELD. Think Thor can talk to the big guy, let him know Thanos might be getting up his nose?"

"He will or I will," Stark said. "I'm gonna bet he'll up there faster than we can say boo, 'cause I wouldn't introduce me to my all-powerful daddy either. Bankruptcy is so ... easy. Shame about that throne, fella, gonna auction it? I'll do it, watch me, I'll take him for everything he's got and then some. I'm a businessman."

Steve managed to smile. "Let's call that, ah, plan C, okay?" He met Loki's eyes, and he looked small
and confused and startled, glancing between them like he'd never seen them before.

"Yay team," Romanova said.

"Yeah," Steve said, holding his eyes and raising an eyebrow, feeling much better now. He wasn't alone. They weren't the Commandos, they weren't Bucky, half of them weren't even soldiers and the other half were former mercenaries, but they had his back and that was what mattered. "We're in this together."

Barton punched Loki in the shoulder. "Douchebags can't stop us now. Even you."

"Yeah, Argue-Argue, as breakup attempts go -- that was kind of ... C for effort, B plus for almost-success, that adds up to, lessee, D for you're fucking dreadful, and not the nice way."

"That's Harry Potter," Banner said. "You read --"

There was a flurry of laughter and protest. "Audiobooks, damnit, damnit, Barton, I have to listen to something in the workshop or Jarvis --"

"Sure, Jarvis," Banner and Barton chorused.

"Seriously, fuck you guys. Tell me Snape wasn't awesome."

"I liked Hermione," Banner said. "She was -- I thought she was nice."

"Nerds of a feather flock together, doc. You're totally Ravenclaw."

"Yeah, uh, you're Hufflepuff."

"Ooh, burn," Tony said, much too gleeful.

Romanova put up her fingers, waving her hand for attention. "Is Loki Draco Malfoy or Snape?"

"Nah, his dad, the Lucius guy. He's all family-oriented and evil and shit, right? He looked pretty messed up in movie six. And, you know. The hair."

She bobbed her head, lips pursing thoughtfully. "I see it."

"What are you talking about?" Steve said, baffled.

"It's a book series," Romanova said. "It's about British wizards. Very popular --"

"I saw the movies," Barton said. "I don't read books."

"-- they also made a movie series," she continued, calmly talking over Barton, then twitched her mouth in a way Steve learned meant she was letting them see she was trying not to laugh. "Stark has mint editions."

"I do not," Tony said. "But Steve can borrow them. I mean, the ones I totally don't have, I'm sticking to plausible deniability, you can't prove anything. You know what we should do? We should watch the movies. We should make Loki watch with us."

"You will not."

"I like this plan," Barton said, and waved a finger in Loki's face. "This is our vengeance for you being a douchebag, dude. You get to watch Harry Potter with us. Every film. You too, Cap. Call it a
cultural experience or something. Nat, can we write that off somewhere?"

"I don't think SHIELD would approve of us doing it on base."

"Yeah, but your place's getting fixed up, right, Stark? You'd have a superhero lounge or something."

Tony cackled. "O, ye of small fletched mind. I've got something even better. If we keep him on the floors I've got finished already that'll work."

"Fury's, uh, he's gonna kill us. You know, I don't think I'm ... supposed to be off government property, so uh, there might be issues."

"Let me deal with that," Romanova said. "I have to explain all this already. A few more things won't matter."

"Hey, let's invite Thor or something. We'll have to pause, like, a thousand times, but it'd be totally worth it."

"I dunno, that might be more cultural explanation that I really ... I mean, isn't fiction kind of ... lying?"

"Damn," Tony said. "That's -- damn. You don't have stories? No romance novels? Wait, wait, does that mean you don't have Photoshop?"

"Duh, Stark."

Loki wrapped his arms around his knees, frowning. "There are sagas of what will be, what has been and comes to be. To tell otherwise is to speak falsehood of the dead."

"So basically we make no sense to Asgard peeps ... at all. Like -- ever." Barton was cackling. "Oh, my God, what if we introduce him to photoshop? Or, wait, I saw this movie, didn't I see this movie?"

"This does resemble Galaxy Quest," Romanova said.

"I don't care! This episode was badly written!" Banner said from the driver's seat, laughing. "I ... I do feel like it's much more relevant than it, uh, really ought to be."

Steve had more than a little empathy for Thor. It was hard enough for him to understand how thoroughly the lines had been blurred, and he already very well knew they could be. He'd been a mouthpiece of the American government, a publicity organ to drum up money and support, and a good deal of his discussions with Fury -- the ones that ended badly -- were about how much, if at all, he would let SHIELD take advantage of that status.

It had to hurt, talking to people and knowing all that stopped them from lying, from making you believe something you were never meant to, was something like ethics or morals or some other intangible quality that couldn't be controlled or trusted. Most people found that out when they were children, but Thor -- well, he'd had Loki.

Lying, deceitful Loki. He really had to wonder how much of it had been trying to protect Thor from the inevitable fallout of Odin's image failing to match up to reality; Thor talked a good game about protecting Loki, and he probably had, a lot, but it seemed like Loki had done just as much. People lie was a hard concept to drum into someone's head, but it was worth doing, if it was someone you cared about.

How often had Loki watched Odin manipulate Thor into doing what he was told? How often had
Loki had to use those same qualities he hated to manipulate him out of it, or change the consequences just enough to please Odin and the court and Thor and himself?

And just how much did Steve remind Loki of Thor, especially at first?

He had to know they were different now. He had to.

"Cap? You with us?"

Steve blinked and rubbed his eyes, surprised to find they were foggy. Must've fallen asleep. "Huh?"

Romanova was studying him curiously, patting his leg where she'd shaken him. "There you are. You drifted off. We're almost there."

"You can nap after we eat, Cap. You ordered ahead, right?"

"Of course." She shrugged. "That is something I can write off."

"Good, I'm starving. So, Stark, do we spoonfeed you, or are you gonna get out of that somehow? Or are you like an easy bake oven now or something?"

"Fuck you. How do you even know what an easy bake oven is? Are you telling us something? I think you're telling us something --"

"Don't give me that shit, mister 'Jarvis made me listen to Harry Potter', every goddamn book --"

"Oh, fuck you, Barton, fuck you and your quiver, I bet you jerk off in it while reading fucking archery mags, oooh, that quill design gets me sooooo hot --"

"You like Snape --"

Steve winced and tuned them out. Loki was watching him, and he tried to look approachable. "What?"

"I..." Loki's adam's apple bobbed. "I apologise."

He blinked. Loki looked ... sincere. How much of it was actual sincerity and not was up for debate, but Steve couldn't see a lie at the moment. "Oh. Er, it's all right. Thank you."

Loki picked at the shirt. "There is clothing awaiting our arrival, yes?"

"That's something else I can write that off," Romanova said. "I think your girl outfit came in, if you want to wear that. I got them to bring in both."

"Oh. You --" He gestured between all of them and Tony, more bewildered by the second. "The construction of the clothing was not a farce?"

"It wasn't a joke, Loki," Romanova said. "We wouldn't joke about that."

"Tony doesn't spend that much time on something he doesn't mean to do," Steve said. "Why don't you try them on when we get there? See if they suit you."

"But Thor --"

Steve cut him off. "If he has a problem with it, he can go through us," he said firmly. "I disagree with you on a lot of things. They have nothing to do with how you look. You've got options. Think about
what you want to do."

"You make no sense." His hands flexed on his knees. "How can you possibly extend this to me?"

"We're in the business of being better people than you are," Romanova said, half-smiling. "It's the same reason we defended Cap against you."

Loki put his chin on his knees, frowning, and Steve smiled at the thanks that reached his ears a few minutes later.

Not enough to go on with -- not at all, and he still felt raw and wounded in a way that no-one could fix except himself, punching bags and more time that he wanted to have. But it was something.

Steve was good at making a hell of a lot of out of a little something.
Chapter 63

Chapter Notes

Debrief. Whoa-oh.


"What the everliving fuck?" Tony realised something was wrong in the thought-to-speech equation and took the pillow out of his mouth. That was better, he could actually talk now. "What the fuck?"

Loki raised an eyebrow at him, arms folded across -- Tony squinted sideways -- his chest. So he hadn't taken them up on it. Okay. "Selvig wished you to know we have finished modifications to the shield."

Tony scratched his chest and yawned. He'd freak out over fourteen-year-olds in his bedroom later, or maybe not. Whatever, it was Loki, lawyers wouldn't even know where to start. "You had to wake me up for this shit?"

Wait, that wasn't his SHIELD bedroom, he was in the infirmary. Again. No lawyers, it was all good.

"I'm getting really tired of this room," he said to no-one in particular. "Am I actually injured, or is this some kind of fetish?"

Bruce hid a snort in his shoulder. Happy Bruce! That was nice. That was good. But he was also worried, and worried Bruce was not good. "Uh, no, you ... you were pretty hurt."

Tony squinted. "Why are you so -- I'm sensing conflict, my conflictdar is pinging. Is it because I'm renting this room now? You can't have it. And you can't have my mattress. I want my mattress."

"Nobody gives a shit about your mattress, Stark."

Ooh, okay. Fury. And he was pissed. "Uh, I didn't do it! Wasn't my fault, you can't pin this on me, no way."

Fury glowered. "So I'm supposed to believe it wasn't your idea to set it up in the middle of the goddamn desert? Conveniently far away? You just happened to conveniently have your suit right there when it went to hell? Exactly how stupid do you think I am?"

"I take responsibility," Loki said smoothly from the door, and he was jostled out of his impressive pose by the other Avengers piling in after him.

"Fuck off, Argue, don't pull that shit. We all got involved." Barton scowled at Fury. "Discipline me and Nat all you want, but we knew the score and we went in. This is a team effort. You want someone to pin it on, pin it on all of us."

"I quite agree," Steve said, adorably Steve-y and Captain-America-y. "I'm happy to turn myself in for disciplinary action."

"We all will if we have to."
Loki rolled his eyes and pushed to the front. "I am responsible for this. It was my consequence to bear. That they intervened is due to their weakness."

"Cease this martyrdom immediately," Thor said, sounding very exasperated and very affectionate and very brotherly. "It suits you not at all."

"I was his target," Loki muttered. "If you had left well enough alone --"

"Seriously, your martyr complex stinks," Tony interrupted, waving a hand in front of his face. "Pee. Fucking. Yew, my God, it's on the nose. Can you believe this kid?" he said to Fury. "He seriously thought we were gonna let him go off to be tortured by the same dudes that drove him so fucking crazy the god of lies started preaching about the freedom to lie being a goddamn lie. I mean, come on, something got fucked up there. Handing him back, seriously? Are we that kind of people, Director? Are we?"

Fury wasn't swayed in the slightest. "And you failed to warn us 'cause you're so goddamned concerned."

"Noooo, because I'm awesome. We're awesome. We contained it, didn't we?"

"By my shield and my brother's, yes," Thor said. "You did not know we were capable. You were foolish."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Please, like you haven't done worse."

Thor twitched a smile. "In my youth."

Loki snorted and coughed. "Jotunheim."

"Hush," Thor said affectionately. "I acknowledge my mistake. Do you find yours, in goading me?"

"No," Loki muttered, face going dark and angry.

Time to intervene. "So, you know, director, make up your mind, huh? It worked out okay!"

"Says the man in a hospital bed," Barton said, shoving the spare bed up against his and climbing onto it. They were totally gonna do this again, weren't they? That was kind of -- Tony was almost touched.

"How come I'm the only one?"

"Loki healed everyone else," Romanova said, coming up his other side.

Tony scowled at Loki and flailed for emphasis, because seriously, goddamnit, hadn't he been nice? "What? What'd I do? Did I fuck up again? You have to tell me when I fuck up, I don't fucking know these things."

"Nothing so arcane," Loki said, taking a seat on a chair at his side. "But we have established a system of barter. I felt deviation would be unwise."

"You just don't want me to owe you anything, don't you?"

"Cut the chit-chat." Fury folded his arms. "What the fuck happened out there?"

Where to even fucking start? "I don't take sole responsibility for this, you know that, right?"
"We all do," Steve said. "Sir, we assembled at a point two hundred and fifty miles from the base at eight-hour hours once Loki indicated the commander would arrive between four to eight hours from that time. We set up according to strategic plans drawn up by Agents Barton and Romanova and waited approximately five hours."

"Cap and Nat took point, Stark and I did aerial support, Thor did both, and Loki handled the defenses. We'd all have gone splat otherwise. The commander had three minions with him. One we took out easily, but the other two were a hell of a lot harder. I took the final shot on one and Thor backed me up, Stark and Cap took the other and Loki exploded both so they couldn't get back up -- kinda a Hydra's heads sort of thing."

Tony took his turn. "Commander dude was fucking strong. I mean, no offense Loki, no, actually, total offense, but he was a hell of a lot stronger than you. Like, I think even Hulk would've had problems. He wasn't indestructible, and he had weak points we could exploit, but it took us a while to figure that out. Mostly Loki played bait and Thor held him off while we all tried not to die."

"I was willing to go with the commander," Loki said quietly.

"That's not your decision to make," Fury said to Loki. "We're not your guardians, and we're sure as fuck not your parents, but for now you're in our custody and that's our decision, not yours. We are not handing you over."

"Yeah, that's pretty much how we felt about it." Tony sat up with a grimace. God, it hurt, and he thumbed the morphine drip. "Anyway, we figured out a way to kill him, but it took a while, and we were all pretty tired. We managed to finish him off with a combination of things, and Barton's arrows were a huge help, but it was touch and go for a while and we had to back off so the indestructible sibs could do most of it. They got shredded."

Steve cleared his throat. "More accurately Thor was seriously wounded and Loki turned himself in to the commander on the understanding that he was only there for Loki."

Thor stared at Loki, who was concentrating very hard on his hands and not looking up. "What?"

"Oh, you didn't hear that part?" Well, this was awkward. "Yeah, that happened, but anyway I didn't catch a bit after that, mostly because Loki was screaming so fucking loud and the commander had this ... energy-whip thing? Anyway, Thor did some kind of Sailor Moon rejection-attack with Mjolnir and Loki followed it up and made him go boom, I was thrown clear for like ten miles or something, Bruce picked us up, and I guess that's where we are."

"Thor would have died if Loki was not able to administer medical care," Romanova said. "Loki was in bad shape, too."

Fury passed a hand over his face, groaning. "Let me see if I understand this. You decided to use an underage enemy combatant as bait?"

"Okay, no, yeah, that was my idea," Tony said. "But he went along with it! See, he's fine now, commander dude's all tartared, we're fine! Ow, stop fucking poking me, Barton."

Barton took his foot back. "Sure you're fine. Sir, it was the best plan we had with the available information. It was ethically risky, but we built in as many safeguards as we could to ensure Loki was never in a position to be snatched up by the commander."

"I was with him at all times, sir," Steve said. "We did the best we could."

"We got a bit, uh, carried away, yeah," Bruce said, fiddling with his glasses in his hands.
"Enough." Fury held up his hands. "You're all fucking suspended without pay. I'm not gonna hold a fucking internal investigation, I don't have the goddamn time, but you two, Agents, should've fucking known better, you, Captain, you need to control your fucking team, and you, Stark, you need to shut the fuck up. And you."

Loki was shrinking back in his chair, wide-eyed and trying to cover it with a sneer. It really wasn't working. "Yes?"

Fury held the glare for a long moment, then sighed. "I'm sorry."

"What?" they chorused. Tony was stunned. What the fuck?

"SHIELD has a duty of care to you and these clowns," sweeping a finger at them, "failed to uphold it. You want me to take them off your guard duty, I'll do it."

"No," Loki said softly, then cleared his throat and straightened. "No, I would prefer they remained."

Thor came forward. "I would not put my brother in danger he could not survive."

"Did I say you could talk?" Fury held up a finger in Thor's face, expression gone back to sucking lemons. "You are the one I'm most disappointed in right now. You -- you -- always knew precisely how young he was. You are the one who says he is fucking unstable. And you claim duty of care? You guarantee his safety on the one hand and toss him into this mess on the other and expect me to be okay with it because you fucking say so. Do not make me laugh."

Fury surveyed all of them.

"You got results. Don't ever, ever get them this way again. The moment you think to involve him back into this shit, I want you, all of you, to get a little voice in your head that says *Loki. Is. Fucking. UNDERAGE* and I want it ringing loud as you can goddamnit make it. Clear? We clear? I'm done here."

The door slammed shut behind him.

Romanova and Barton were giving each other looks over Tony's head. Significant looks, and he craned his head back to catch their eyes. "What?"

Loki chuckled, and Tony swung back to look at him. Huh. He was in a good mood, too, looked like it, and he'd be way more scared by the prospect of Loki in a good mood if he didn't look so not-menacingly pleased with himself.

"Seriously, what? What's with the secrets?"

"Can I not be pleased at the death of one of my enemies?"

Tony narrowed his eyes. "Sure. As long as it's not us."

His eyes crinkled, voice suspiciously light. "Oh, no. Never."

"I'm watching you," he told him.

Steve leaned over his feet, all earnest and worried. "I don't think we had much alternative."

"Not in that timeframe," Romanova said. "He knew that. He was making a point."

Barton was grimacing. "Kinda valid."
"Hold up here. Hold just a goddamn minute." Tony raised an eyebrow at Loki. "Do you feel like we used you in our dastardly plot to protect you?"

"I am pleased to aid in the destruction of my enemy." Loki shrugged. "Your mortal restrictions do not concern me, however unevenly you apply them."


Thor touched Loki's shoulder, drawing back a little when he hissed and yanked away. "You defended me?"

"Oaf," Loki hissed. "'Twere habit, no more. A habit which you loathe. Should you not be so disgusted as to find me unbearable?"

"Nay, bro--" Thor hesitated. "Loki. Nay. I do not like your methods, true, but there is no other I would have at my side."

He looked somewhere between very pleased and very uncomfortable. "Still you divide yourself. Choose, or not at all."

"Can I not hold a thought of my own?"

"Oh, it is your opinion of my magics you spout? Forgive me, I had thought you were our illustrious, ever hypocritical father's mouthpiece, puppeted at will. It is not his life I have saved time and again, and I never will."

"You denied me Valhalla in the name of mercy, cow?" Thor was looming, seriously pissed, and Loki was taking breaths so deep he looked like an enraged pufferfish.

"Hey, break it up. Hey. Hey! Bruce, Bruce, make them break it up, no fighting in my room, I'm an invalid here."

Bruce got between them, shoving at Thor's shoulder with a very professional smile. "Sorry, you two. We'd, uh, we're rather not get into this right now."

Loki's shoulders went further and further down the more Thor backed off, and Steve chivvied him to the side of the bed and sat down next to him, trapping him between himself and Romanova.

Good old Steve. Barton and Bruce had Loki between them on the other side, too, and Tony ... Tony was in the middle.

Great.

"So why were you so happy when Fury was doing the jiggajigga on my bed?" he said to Bruce.

Bruce snorfled. Score for Tony. "No, uh, I -- I had a conversation with Loki, before you headed out to, uh, deal with the commander."

"I spoke to the beast." Loki folded his hands in his lap, unexpectedly prim. "It was instructive."

"Yeah, uh, you know how I'm always angry? It's easier. I'm not ... less angry, but, uh, it helped. We -- we can sort of talk a bit to each other now."

Tony considered Loki, remembered Steve, and felt his own lungs inflate better than they had in years, then beckoned. "Come here, Argue-Argue."
Loki raised an eyebrow, but leaned down anyway, and Tony managed to sock him in the jaw. He wasn't sure if it was just courtesy that Loki held still -- probably -- and the twist of his chin was probably just selling it since his skin barely rippled. But Tony appreciated it anyway even if he was totally pissed off right now.

"You do not get to give going-away gifts, asshole!"

"I --"

"Stop right there, you twisted little fuck, we weren't going to let you go haring off, d'you hear me --"

Bruce was getting involved too now. "Is that what it was? What? So you could, I dunno, clear your conscience and go off with the commander? It doesn't work that way."

Loki sneered. "Forgive me if I thought it a kindness. Clearly I was mistaken."

"That's not the point, goddamnit," and Tony tugged at his wrist, careful to keep his fingers on leather, not skin, the way he was radiating cold. "The point is, Thor tries to take you back, he'll go through us. I don't care if I'm in bed, I'll do wheelies in Fury's office if I have to, he is not going to take you back there." He threw out an arm to the other side, showing Thor his palm. "Stop right there, big guy. What I'm saying, it goes for anybody who tries to take you."

Loki pinched his lips together. "And if I decide?"

"Sorry, Argue-Argue." Tony let go. "If you were an American citizen you'd file for emancipation or something, but I'm not gonna touch that hot mess and the moment we both know your mum'd really like it if you took a short walk off a long goddamn pier and making you one of us would definitely count. I'm just not gonna volunteer for that shit."

"That was always the case," Loki said, smiling.

"Pier? I do not understand."

Romanova shifted. "It means she wants him dead, Thor."

He roared to his feet. "This is intolerable! Enough of your lies, brother, you have twisted their thoughts to your dark whims and I will not stand for it. Your discontent is nothing but poison -- our mother has always been your ally, your advocate, and you betray her this way? How dare you?"

"I did not tell them," Loki said, but he didn't look very surprised by any of it.

Barton chortled. "Sit your ass down, Thor. He didn't tell us. He didn't need to say a goddamn word. She showed us all on her own." He exchanged a look with Romanova. "No-one's that sweet to their kid who just blew up an entire goddamn planet."

Thor glared around at them. "Our mother is kind and forgiving. He has lied."

Tony yawned theatrically. "You're missing the point. He didn't say anything. This is what we think of her. She might be the sweetest, nicest woman in the universe. She might even bake you pecan pies and say good night. But, you know, Steve heard a funny story the other day." He cocked his head. "Did she really tell you Frost Giants rape and murder Aesir kids for a nice little bedtime story?"

"When we did not sleep when commanded, yes," Thor said. "That was the moral. She did not speak of Loki. Those tales are of Jotun. My brother is of Asgard, and raised at my side. You are nothing
like them, brother."

Well, fuck Tony sideways running through a field of corn. Fuck. Him. Sideways. It was so bad it was almost hilarious.

"Oh, my God, you're unbelievable." Barton groaned into his hands and Romanova leaned across Tony to pat his back.

Tony cleared his throat. "Thor? Not helping."

Loki was quivering, fists curled on his lap and very like he was on the verge of tears. "And yet I am one all the same. I wear a mask, Thor, as I have ever, and I always knew I wasn't one of you. I always knew I was different. I am one of that race of monsters, and to tell me I am not --" He laughed bitterly. "How is it you think I heal, brother? Jotun are formed of their land and the winter shapes them. That you take their casket does not take that from them. Nor does it take it from me. Your flesh is what I have given you from mine, brother, and no other. Nothing else."

Thor was staring at his leg, his hands, horrified. "You have used their arts on me."

"To save you."

"To punish me, is more the matter," Thor growled. "What do you hope to achieve with these teachings? Have you not wounded me enough, or will your vengeance upon me for Angrboda last forever? Shall you make me of her image with the arts you whored yourself for?"

Loki was on his feet. "Do not speak of her again."

Thor sneered. It was ugly on his face, almost cruel, and Steve was pressing on his chest. "Hey now, hey, why don't we get a breather--"

"There is no-one that will love you as we do," Thor said, grimly satisfied.

"Thor, shut up!"

Tony waved his hands frantically as Loki got paler and paler. "Stop talking, stop talking, stop fucking talking--"

"No-one. You will never have better, brother. Never. You are loved beyond compare and that is all you shall ever need. It is all you shall ever have."

Loki whimpered and disappeared in a flash of green.

"Oh, shit, someone find him before he blows us up."

"I have an idea," Barton said, getting up and climbing into the ceiling, what the fuck, Barton, seriously. Wasn't that just taking it too far? "You're an asshole, buddy."

Steve was pissed, definitely, and Thor looked guilty but also a whole lot satisfied. "What the hell, Thor?"

"I spoke but the truth," with a nasty little edge. "I have no need of lies."

Tony choked a laugh. "Hell of a way to prove it, asshole. Why the fuck did you do that?"

"So, uh, the conversation we had, that was, uh, basically for nothing, huh?" Bruce was nodding thoughtfully. "That's ... great."
Thor rubbed his hands very slowly down his face. "I am not myself."

"Yeah, uh ... I don't buy it," Bruce said. "I think maybe you're, uh, naturally kind of an asshole."

Tony couldn't stop laughing. "Welcome to the club, Thor! We have martinis!"

Thor just looked miserable, uncomfortably patting his chest and legs. "It is one thing to condemn me to life, Tony. It is another to do so by Jotun magics."

"You were really prepared to die, weren't you?" Tony knew how that felt. "You know what, take a seat. It'd be easier for you if you got the whole glorious death in battle thing, sure. But, Thor, buddy, sometimes there just isn't anybody else. It sucks. Live with it. And for fuck's sake, stop pissing him off."

The chair creaked when he collapsed into it, but it held, thankfully -- Tony wasn't sure how Thor would react to falling through a chair right now, but he'd bet it was explosive and he kind of liked the bed upright as it was considering he was in it at the moment, thanks. "I owe life to a Jotun. I am not sure the situation can worsen."

Romanova sighed and started counting on her fingers. "One, two, three ..."

"Oh, God, you jinxed us, didn't you, keep your mouth shut, we do not need more shit today --"

"Mother?" Thor said, confused, and got up. "But why is she there?"

"You asshole!"

Loki opened the door, still upset but smirking. "How sad it is to be the bearer of terrible news. It seems your director is being extradited for, ah, 'treason', I believe. Perhaps executed. The meaning seemed quite synonymous."

"Okay, one, where the fuck did you go, two, what the fuck, three, seriously, no, I mean -- what the actual fuck?" He grabbed an IV stand and squinted in it, making a face at his hair. Oh, well, he'd write it off as gel or something. Gel for invalids. "When did this happen?"

"Two minutes from now. I suggest you hurry."

"Here?" Bruce said.

Tony pulled on the shirt Steve handed him and fussed with the cuffs, the better to stare at Loki. "I really mean it now. What the actual fucking fuck?"

Loki rolled his eyes. "I do have some precognition. It shows me death."

Thor confirmed it with a nod.

Great. "And you saw Fury's," Tony said, flailing for shoes. "I hope they're not inevitable."

"Not necessarily his, but he was present." Loki pursed his lips. "Perhaps I should have healed you after all. You do look as though you've been chased by wild boars."

"Thanks," Tony said, sliding on sunglasses, grabbing his jacket, and flailing for Jarvis. "Somebody drive me. I want a cool chair. The coolest."

"I don't seem to have a choice," Loki said, and it was unfair that Tony's trot was her walk. Damn long-legged aliens. But at least with Steve and Loki behind him they were going at a pretty fast clip.
Wait, her?

Tony squinted. Definite her. Fortunately Thor hadn't noticed yet. They slipped into an elevator and Tony jabbed the appropriate buttons and glared. "This isn't my death, right?"

Loki smiled. "That, I do not need to forsee. Your death is no feat."

"Harsh," Bruce said, but he was smiling. Fine, laugh at Tony's pain.

"Why didn't you take Fury anyway? You got Barton, you got Selvig, you got a couple SHIELD agents I don't know about yet," stepping out as the doors opened, hooking his arm back through and towing Loki along. "You could've easily taken him too, whole plan would've gone a hell of a lot different."

He felt his shrug through the chair. "I assumed he was your most expendable. Your social roles have changed little from when I was here before."

Tony blew out a breath. "It's a sad, sad day when gods notice this shit. Hill! Agent Hill! Beloved, beautiful, fabulous --"

"The queen's in there."

"Oh, shit, she's executing him? He must've tried to stall her, this is terrible. Barton! Barton, come in, Hawky." He took a moment to neaten his tie. "We're about to be a scandal, Argue-Argue. We're gonna be the best interstellar tabloid scandal in the world. You up for it?"

"Getting there," Barton said over the comm.

"I am disowned as it stands," Loki said. "What is one more offense?"

Tony grabbed coffee off Hill's desk and chugged it. "That's the ticket. Right. Barton, get into place. Romanova, push me but don't say anything. Loki, come here, stand here. Bruce, hang around in case we need you to Hulk, but I don't want you listening in case you Hulk anyway 'cause you're gonna so pissed off, seriously, can't tell if it's gonna be at me or her yet actually. Steve?"

"I'll get my shield." He glanced around. "I don't like this location."

"Work with it. Move, people. Thor -- Thor, buddy, hang around with Bruce, okay? Hang around. I'll signal Barton, and he'll let you know when you can come in. But I need you to stay out if we're going to make any of this work, including you being here. Okay? I need to settle Earth business, I can't do that if you're there being all Asgardy."

Thor didn't look happy. "Fine."

"In place," Barton said. "He's not dead yet, but she's pissed. Hurry up, Stark. I have a shot."

"Right." He beckoned to Loki. "Shoulders back, stand up straight -- we're gonna piss off the queen of the gods, we're gonna act like we've got a god-given right to do it, and you know what, I do, I'm American, I have the right to piss on anybody I damn well please. My daddy made me a self-made man and that is not a fucking oxymoron because God bless America. Push on, Agent Romanova."

The doors breezed open, and Tony suspected that was Loki's sense of drama, plus the way they closed so neatly behind them.

"I'm gonna be a lech, don't kill me," he muttered, just for Loki's little shoulderhitch of amusement,
good, the kid was too goddamn tense, and strolled right on in. "Ma'am, may I say how lovely you are today?"

Whoa, there, the lady was not amused. In fact, Fury was about two inches from having a golden spike rammed into the remaining eye, and that was just playing unfair. There was an extra socket and everything. The point of it held very still as the Queen turned her head.

She was so like his mum. Could cut a senator dead at eighty paces and not even finish the sip of extra-dry martini, god rest her sad, pathetic soul.

Too bad for her Tony wasn't a senator, now wasn't it?

"Anthony," she said, sounding very civil and regal and all except for the fact that she had Fury braced over the table. So motherly. So sweet. "Natalya. I'm rather busy, I'm afraid. If you wouldn't mind?"

Poor Brucie just wanted to hope so bad it was real that he pounced on it at the first inkling sitcom-moms might be real. He'd never have seen it coming when she told him to do something and he obeyed for fear of making her stop loving him like that.

"Yeah, I do mind, actually, I was kind of hoping I could grab Fury, work out a few things he's gotta yell at me about? I know I've saved up, like, at least ten things already today, I'm sure I'll just add a bunch more if I keep talking. So, uh, what brings you here? Nice chat you're having. I love what you've done with your hair, really sets off the brooches."

Tony leaned in to kiss Loki's cheek and heard Romanova stifle a giggle.

"Unfortunately, I have a star here and I'm afraid you -- eh -- I don't wanna be offensive, but ma'am, you look like somebody hung you out to dry. Are those wrinkles? My God, they're wrinkles. Ever heard of anti-ageing cream?"

He could feel Loki goggling at him. "You are a lunatic!" she hissed, pretending to kiss his cheek in return. "An absolute -- you cannot -- foolish little mortal!"

"Not dead yet, go with it," Tony muttered back, and pulled out a chair for Loki, gesturing for her to sit down. Romanova moved one so he could roll in. He had to give her points -- she could act the little princess even when she was cussing him out through perfectly immobile lips. They were both doing it, actually. It was kind of hilarious.

The queen let go of Fury, which was good, that was the plan, except she was pissed off at him now, which, bad idea, very bad idea. "I didn't actually mean that -- it's just, you know, I have a cosmetics line, I might be able to wangle some free samples, let me know what you think --"

"Anthony." She smiled sadly. "What have you done to my son?"

Tony saw Romanova lean on Loki's foot to stop her from getting up. "Nothing she didn't want, ma'am," in his best rogueish you-know-what-I-mean-oh-yeah-you-do tone, and he winked. "You can count on me to pleasure myself. At ... the convenience of whichever young lady I'm entertaining."

He patted Loki's hand, ignoring the way she put it under the table afterwards like he'd scalded her when really, it was his hand needing medical attention, fucking ow she was cold. "But I do -- you know, I do go for the mature looks, and you do have a fascinating figure. Do they just not have gravity on Asgard? Do you have a secret?"

"Stark," Loki hissed, sounding so scandalised Tony wondered if her hair was standing on end. "That is my mother."
"I hope you know what you're doing," Romanova said behind him.

The queen closed her eyes and let out a very long sigh. "Anthony, you are so inappropriate I hardly know what to do with you. Do you speak to all your queens this way?"

"I'm an equal-opportunity chauvinist pig, ma'am. Now that I've introduced myself, what d'you want? Fury can't give it to you, maybe I can. Me and him? He's not even in the same league. He wishes, though. It's cute. Let's be blunt here. You want something."

"I wish to retrieve my sons," she said, and Romanova stood on Loki's foot again at the glance she gave her daughter, so cold it felt like his skin was flayed off just by it shooting past him. "They are needed at home. Your father was not in Odinsleep long enough, child, and he wearies so. Someone must rule while he sleeps, and I do miss you both. My handsome sons."

"Are you blind, lady?" Tony jerked at thumb at Loki. "Pretty sure she was a she last night. Weren't you a she last night? Did I just -- is this a wrong-hole scenario? Please tell me I wasn't the punchline to that golfer joke."

"Not at all," Loki said smoothly. "Mother, I am as you see."

"Oh, child. I thought better of you."

Oh, yeah, Romanova was getting pissed off on Loki's behalf now, he could tell from the way she was easing up on Loki's foot.

Loki smiled back, mirroring her mother so closely it was a bit creepy. "My poor mother. I tax you so."

The queen nodded, looking so gentle and such a perfect mirage Tony wanted to throw things at her just to make sure they bounced off. "Your madness worries me, child. We will help you regain your mind once again. We understand how lost you've been. It cannot have been easy." She was approaching, and Tony did yet another ill-advised thing and slung his arm over Loki's shoulders, dragging her close in a show of familiarity. "Child, you do know taking with a mortal in that form is --."

"Ill-advised? Wrong?" Good, Loki found her backbone somewhere. "Not what I should do, lest I bear yet more monsters to vex you?"

"You do make it rather a habit, child."

Loki put her hand over her mouth and screeched into her palm, so stifled it could've been anything, and Tony discreetly chugged the rest of his coffee and made Extremely Expressive Eyes at Fury.

"As you make your disappointment in me. You cannot be pleased, mother; you would only be pleased if I were a child of your body, and that is beyond all my power. That would satisfy you, would it not? If I were gone and I became a child you could love instead?"

The queen heaved a sigh. "Why do you twist my words? Are you truly so lost that you accuse me of this? You are a child of my heart. Do not doubt that."

"You're gonna have to explain what you're doing here or else I'll have you escorted off the premises." Fury recovered like a racecar driver, Tony had to give props for that, but he'd meant him to fuck off, not get involved again.

Stupid heroes and their martyr complexes. "Aw, come on, what's a little coffee between gods and
"puny little mortals?"

"Shut it, Stark. Well, ma'am?"

She smiled. "Truly, I mean to bring my sons home. The ravens tell me the threat is finished, and they are free to return. I would them home safe and sound, Nicholas. It is my dearest wish."

Fury glowered. It was impressive for a one-eyed dude. Tony would have to make, like, a birthday giftcard or something, compliments of Hallmark. 'Congrats on being niftier than the other one-eyed dude!', or something. "Yeah, I think we're gonna disagree over just what that means. It sounds to me like you're gonna take the girl there and brainwash her."

"Nicholas, I do not expect you to understand. You are mortal. These are godly affairs. Your concern is touching, but there is no need. All we want is for our son to return to us."

"Yeah, your son. Forgive me if I'm gonna go with my eyes on this one. You're not so mysterious as you think, ma'am. You're going to open her up and pour in somebody else, maybe not for the first time and maybe not the last, and hope it sticks. It won't."

Fury pointed at Loki, and Tony really, really was glad for Romanova, was glad she and Loki did the girltalk thing, because Loki looked about two inches from running for the hills.

"Have you even met the kid? She could teach mules and Captain Rogers a thing or seven about stubborn, and you think fiddling with her head'll help? I gotta say you're delusional or else you're just not paying a goddamn bit of attention."

"And you," very calm, "overstep your bounds once again, Nicholas. I am merciful. I am not so merciful to let your insult pass. I know my child, and my child would never be this way. You have done this to him."

His arm was empty and Loki was there instead, staggering and clutching the dagger sticking out of her throat, her back to Fury and had she seriously just stepped in front of a knife for Fury? She had, oh God, she had, what the fuck.

Loki gave the queen a victorious smile, grasping the handle and drawing it out, blood gushing down the front and sleeve of the new armour -- Tony was gonna have to order more, shit, why did they always all go through uniforms like tissue paper, seriously now -- and putting her hand back over the hole, plugging it with a glowing-green fingertip so she could talk. "Stark likes him. You can't have him."

"That's a lie." Tony cleared his throat, doubleplus happy Romanova was bristling with weaponry firmly aimed at the queen. "But yeah, you can't, he's kind of ours, so ... if you'd mind backing the fuck off?"

Fury looked kind of wild around the edges. Tony sympathised. They'd had enough exposure to Loki that some of the weirdness had worn off and she was just a really annoying dickbag with moments, but Fury hadn't seen much of the random saving-people side.

Tony signalled Barton. This was just going to get worse without Thor now.

The queen was making deeply, deeply hurt faces. "You would defend this mortal, child? After what he said of you? Of us?" She reached out, and Tony must've blinked at the wrong moment or something because the dagger was sticking out of her hand instead and the queen was gasping.

"How can you attack me after all I have done for you? My child, you are in there. I promise, I will
draw you free from your nightmares, we shall find you and coax you into the light. We shall rid you of this poison. My child would never wound his mother."

"Mother?"

Oh, shit. Thor. He'd called him just that bit too early. Thor, blonde and tousled and upset, looking at all of them like they were strangers.

And at Loki.

Especially Loki.

Loki, who was still girl-looking for probably the first time Thor had ever seen it, who Thor had just watched her stab her mother in the hand for what probably looked like no reason.

Damage control, and Tony got into his line of sight. "Hey, buddy, look who turned up, you're just in time, there's a perfectly reasonable explanation for all this, I know it looks funny, but how about you listen a bit, it's actually kind of hilarious, so why don't we step outside and I'll --"

"I heard what occurred." Thor came forward, glancing between them, Mjolnir somehow very heavy-looking at his side, and Tony tried not to cringe out of the way but sort of did anyhow, really glad the wheels of his chair were oiled silent. "Mother, don't you remember? He has always refused. Ever Eir has asked and you have demanded, and he has refused."

"Oh, Thor." She went to him, hands fluttering over his shoulder. "Look at him, wearing such a face! I fear it is as you have said, he is quite mad. Oh, it is pitiful, my son, I wish to have him home. Will you not have him home with us? I know you have supported him, my child, and you have fared so well, but truly, is this not too much to bear?"

Thor was shivering, making faces like he was going to hurt someone, and Loki was all healed up, whitefaced and biting her lips and waiting like Thor was her executioner. It didn't bode well that they'd just had that fight -- Thor was so unpredictable right now.

Tony seriously hoped he wouldn't do anything of the execution-y sort, that would be ... bad, very bad, especially as he couldn't actually tell who'd get turned into Mjolnir-pancakes even with the scene they'd made. Thor was pissed off enough to fuel an army with enough adrenaline for a month.

"Mother," very soft, like he was mourning someone, "it will not work. You will accomplish nothing. Loki remains Loki, always. To have him as he should be for a time only worsens the loss. I would not have you weep and thus I will return very soon, to ease your pain. But I will not help you take Loki."

"Oh, child, it is the only way. Surely you realise that? Consider how he treats you. How he has betrayed us. It would not be love to spare him, child."

Thor twitched a tiny little smile, and Tony got the impression he and Loki were talking through Expressive Eye Contact, he just couldn't decipher what. "And of how I have behaved, mother? Will you condemn me? Will you forgive me my cruelties, my hatreds, my petty ways? The way I harm with my truth?"

She looked genuinely confused. "Oh, Thor. There is nothing to condemn. Will you not help me save your brother?"

"No, Mother." He had his eyes closed, mouth twisting pain. "Speak no further."
"Thor, you must --"

He twisted a glare on her, all resentment and hurt, half like he wanted to push her away, half like he wanted to beg forgiveness forever, but he was very steady. "Am I not to be your king?"

The queen went very still, and Tony saw her rage, how quickly she smothered it beneath concern and acknowledgement and all those perfect motherly things that just couldn't always be true. "Yes, child. You are."

Tony kind of pitied her for a moment. At least he got to have his drink as an excuse to drop the face sometimes.

But the pity got lost under whatthefuck as he saw Thor's shoulder dip in something that might've almost been a stagger, and Thor -- Thor was rocksteady. Thor could teach rocks how to be grounded. Thor did not fucking stumble, didn't list, didn't faint, didn't go hazy-eyed like that.

Tony saw Loki twitch and really, that was just the confirmation cherry on something he already guessed for himself.

"Thor." Romanova clapped him on the arm and ushered him away from her, getting in between them and giving her one of the best unimpressed Tony'd ever seen.

The queen just raised an eyebrow right back, and Tony really, really wanted to just punch her a thousand times over.

He got it. He got how much it must fucking suck for her. That didn't mean he agreed. Hell no. He didn't agree in the goddamn slightest. "You need to back off, boss lady."

"Hate to say it, but I agree with Stark. Thor just promised to come back soon as he can manage. I'm not sure how much more you're waiting for here, but you're not going to get it. Odin's just going to have to play keepawake for a bit longer."

She smiled. "Ah, did I not say? I wish to visit my grandson."

Loki made a noise that might've been a sob. "Mother --"

"Nay, child."

"No," Romanova said, still standing between the queen and the rest of them, and god, sometimes Tony loved her a whole lot. Embarrassingly a lot. "You will not."

"Oh, Natalya, that is not your choice. Why do you pretend?"

"My name is Natasha and I don't give you permission to use it."

Thor was silent, and Tony nudged him. "Dude, say something."

"It is her right to see her family," troubled.

"Damned if it is, she'll kill him," and Tony punched him a little. "Just look at your sis, seriously, you think she makes that face for a visit?"

"I don't think --"

"Thor. It doesn't matter what you think she's going to do, Thor. Look at her. What do you think she thinks your mum's going to do? Look, what if you're wrong? Look at her. Look at them. What if
you're wrong? Can you live with that?"

Loki was swaying like she was about to faint, and it would've just looked like she was sick if she wasn't rubbing the bracelets so hard against her wrists that she was bleeding.

She saw they were watching her and stopped, lowering her hands and looking away.

The queen was smiling, and the golden blade was loose and easy in her hand. She was enjoying it, and he felt from the way Thor shrank back a bit that he'd seen it too.

"Come on, big guy," Tony said. "You already stepped up for her. Don't back off now."

Thor rumbled a sigh. "I am told he is well. There is no need. And truly," taking a few steps forward and in front of Loki, coming a little in front of Romanova too, "I would not have you in this filthy air a moment longer. It is tasteless, mother, and so harsh; your skin is so fair. I would not see your beauty withered."

The queen hated it, obviously, wanted to get past him and drag Loki kicking and screaming, but she smiled at Thor instead and even managed to make it reach her eyes.

Lady wasn't bad at this shit.

"You are so kind to an old woman, Thor. I shall have a feast for your homecoming." She kissed his cheek, and Tony was about to yelp something about boundaries when she backed off, Tesseract pulsing in her hand, and smiled at Loki again. "My child. Soon you will be cured of what ails you. You need only hold onto hope. Trust your brother. Return with him. Come to us. We love you."

At least she'd backed off somewhat gracefully, even if that was a very dire threat. Very dire. Tony quietly told Jarvis to shoot anything that moved anywhere near Jormungandr.

Thor turned around very slowly when she was gone, a muscle jumping in his jaw and his knuckles white around Mjolnir, and he stared for a long, long moment, looking Loki up and down and taking in every inch, increasingly upset. "Why do you play this game?"

"Thor, watch your words," Romanova said, lowering the guns but still coming off dangerous.

Loki sighed through her nose, tendons in her neck standing out against the skin. "It is no game. I find I may prefer this form once in a while. The mortals have a term for it."

"When have you cared for mortal thought? What is this that you show me? Am I to think all my efforts these years were to waste, simply another of your tricks, hiding yourself and bending me to your whims? How far must I abase myself in your defense before you will trust me in the slightest? How must I defend you? My friends, the people, the court, our father, our mother now, too? How you must have laughed to see me protect you. The glee you must feel, knowing I loved a shadow."

"Hey, now, wait, wait, that's uncalled for --"

"If that is as it is to be," Loki said, "then so be it. I am not family regardless, am I not?"

Romanova circled closer. "Thor, be careful."

"You are no longer prince. You are my brother, when you will show yourself as one. I know not this gamine creature seeking only to mock me, and I will not abide it. Speak to me as a brother or not at all."

Thor strode out in the kind of purposeful angry way that basically made him into a battering ram even Tony couldn't talk into stopping.

Romanova sighed and sheathed her guns. "That wasn't being careful."

"Well, that ... I don't know. Hey, Loki, what are you doing?"

She was tearing at the straps on the sleeves, tearless and frantic. "You must burn this, it must be destroyed. If you will not I will, and so shall this wretched face, this mask, I am not -- I am always a fool --"

"Stop that! Seriously, come on, it's not that bad, it's okay, it doesn't mean you can't, it just means he needs to go be blonde and broody for a while, he still loves you, okay? All right?"

Romanova came to sit on the table, pushing out a chair next to Loki and gesturing to it. "It'll be all right. Sit down. It'll be okay."

"He would not even look upon it to know me. It is not all right, it is very expressly not all right, you inane, pitiful, bleating creature."

Fury sighed. "Sit down, real power, and I'll get you a magazine if you'll stop getting naked."

Tony stared at Fury and made baffled flaily gestures. Seriously, what?

Loki was vibrating, more clawing gouges in her coat than actively ripping at it. "How could a -- a magazine possibly help me?"

"It's for folks like you, that's why."

She stopped, half-stepping back. "Like me?"

"Sit. Hill, you wanna grab the periodicals I ordered?"

Tony desperately, desperately wanted coffee, but he wheeled closer anyway.

A stack of glossies thumped on the table, and they were -- Tony tilted his head. Huh.

Fury sat on the edge of the table and leafed through the top one, opening the pages in front of Loki, who sat down and stared at them and Fury's hand and up at him, a confused tangle of hair sitting in bloody, half-shredded robes. They'd actually looked really nice for the few hours they'd lasted.

"It's okay, Barton, we're doing show and tell now or something," Tony said into his comm. "Take care of Thor or something."

"Bruce and Selvig are on it. Mostly he just stormed out."

"Not literal storms, right?"

"Probably, but there's coffee."

"Well, fuck, that's something at least." Tony tuned back into the conversation, Fury still leafing slowly.

"There's articles. Not sure how many are relevant to your situation, but there's talk of male-to-female, female-to-male, female-to-neither, male-to-neither, people who're both, inbetween. Pictures, interviews, what they look like, things they like. Seen something like this before?"
Loki shook her head and slowly reached for the page, dragging it closer and peering down at the model, glossy brown hair and unselfconsciously holding a pot of some kind of succulent, laughing, long hair and red beard and low v-neck top.

"This country's got a hell of a way to go before it catches on to these people," tapping the page. "But they're out there. A lot of them talk about telling their families, the shit that happens. You're not alone in that either."

Tony flipped up his sunglasses, incredulous. "Director, when the hell did you get so sensitive?"

Romanova shook her head next to him. "Oh, Stark."

"What? It's a legitimate question!" She sighed into her palm, like he was too hopeless to even look at, and it was seriously annoying. "What? Come on."

Fury got up. "Still remember the first time I saw a magazine full of blacks, Stark. Kinda thing leaves an impression on a kid. You two take those someplace. I'm busy."

Tony scooped up some of the pile, Loki handing them off like she still wasn't sure what to do with them, and Tony ended up lugging them all on his lap on the return trip to the infirmary, because seriously, he still fucking hurt and either he was getting more coffee or he was sleeping and he hadn't had coffee, so sleep obviously won.

Steve helped get them off him and Tony refused to be carried into bed like a goddamn princess, but leaning on his arm was okay. Way less embarrassing than if Romanova did it. Loki was hovering near the couch, staring uncertainly at the covers.

"Just sit there and read them or something, I'm napping. Nobody bothers me except you, they wouldn't fucking dare, soooo ... take your time, whatever, and seriously, don't believe everything you read. Just look at the pictures or something. Show Cap, he'd like it too."

"Oh, what are they?" Steve padded over to the couch. "Oh. Oh, that's wonderful. Doesn't this cover look a bit like you? Here's the plugs for Jormungandr, I'm sure you want to know he's okay."

Loki still sounded hoarse, but also comfortingly indignant. "I will not thank you for the comparison. I would never wear that."

"Well, I don't know. I had an unit in the army, you see, and ..."

He fell asleep to the steady rustle of pages.

Good thing about sleep: no goddamn drama.
Chapter 64

Chapter Summary

Some gender policing. Also I'm starting classes, so I probably won't post tomorrow. :)
sometimes you have a sister. I mean, come on, this can't be that much of a surprise, the way you're talking."

Thor threw up his hands, and Clint was very, very glad they'd asked him to leave Mjolnir in the corner. "I am doomed, friends. Our mother knows, now, and so too will our father, and our father has ever, ever disapproved of the Lady Sif. To know of Loki's inclination --" His shoulders sagged. "I shall be blamed. Why, Thor, did you not allow Eir to change him while he slept? Why, Thor, did you defend his cowardly ways? Why, Thor, did you protect the viper at your throat? Why, Thor, did you fail him? Why, Thor, did you fail all of us? Why, Thor, did you not insist upon teaching him arms? Why, Thor, did you not allow us to take his arts from him? Why, Thor, did you not allow us to kill his children? Why, Thor, are you such a stubborn, spiteful, ungrateful, disobedient wretch? Look what you have done, Thor. Look what you have done." He put his face in his hands. "I see what I have done, indeed."

Banner cleared his throat. "That's ... that's very unfair. I mean, uh, have you ever been able to control Loki, really? I mean, he might listen to you sometimes, but, uh, I get the impression he persuaded you a lot, too."

Thor started pacing again, hands folded behind his back and something grim in his smile. "The throne of Asgard knows not of fairness, doctor. Nor does the All-Father. There is only right and victory, and I have failed both. I have failed my brother. How I have failed."

Clint put his hand on his fist, watching the way Thor paced. It was jagged, like he was twisting away from thinking about something, half-twisting out of step before he wrenched himself back. "What's the real problem?" He observed him for a moment. "Your mum?"

"Yes. Yes, indeed." He hissed disapprovingly. "I have never seen her be so -- she has never before defied me. She has never before had such a gaze."

He exchanged significant looks with Banner, who was wincing as exaggeratedly as Clint wanted to. The queen was a brilliant woman. There wasn't really any doubt about that -- it was in the way she carried herself, how she acted, the fact that she could do what she did. Brilliant, and fierce, and likely a much better king of the Odin kind than Thor.

And she, with that brilliance and behind-the-scenes politicking, was supposed to submit to Thor? Spoiled, clueless Thor who talked about 'womanly arts' like they were poison, or some kind of barely-tolerated skin disease? Who probably owed his life a thousand times over to her ability to smile at the right time and say the right things to a thousand diplomats, smoothing over mistakes big and small?

And that was the first time she'd ever openly protested? Clint had seen her face when Thor did the I-am-your-king thing. He'd seen her face, and it haunted him.

She'd hated Thor, in that moment. Hated him the way he'd only seen Nat, relegated to the same mission over and over again because of her skillset, hate her handlers before Clint convinced Coulson to take her on.

"Thor, buddy," not really sure if he should bother picking out what he said since he'd probably piss him off anyway, "your mum's smarter than you. You know that, right?"

"Of course," he said, turning on his heel and so honestly confused Clint kind of wanted to smack him. "Her mind is equal to the All-Father, and that is as it should be. He cannot consort with one who is not his equal."
"Hoo boy."

"So, uh, and Loki is smarter than you. You know that, right?"

"Yes," Thor said, frowning impatiently. "Of course I know this; he does not allow me to forget it."

Clint whistled through his teeth. "I bet it really pisses you off when he lords it over you."

He sat on a stool, palms braced on his thighs. "At times he is my voice of reason. At times I suspect he speaks only to be petty, and that does irritate me."

"Okay, so ... how do you think your mum feels?"

Thor blinked at them. "She is the All-Mother, and powerful indeed. She has no cause to resent."

"Yeah, but she's still a she. You know. Queen, not, uh ... king."

"She cannot be. Of course she cannot. I do not understand your bent."

"Loki can't either now, right?" Clint tapped his fingers. They'd come back to the Frigga problem later. "He's a she sometimes, he's too -- he's too ambiguous. And there's the blowing up a planet thing, but the real problem is the magic and gender stuff, right?"

Thor sighed, slow and deep. "Yes. I am to be king. He has discharged his duties quite well. It does not matter in any case -- he was disowned some time past."

"So what's the problem?"

"There are many." Thor quirked a smile. "Chief being that I ... I miss my brother terribly, and to think I find him, and yet once again he is not there -- it is very trying. Perhaps he was not there at all, and I loved a shade. I don't know."

Clint rolled his eyes and reached back to take the coffee Banner handed him. "You've got a lot to talk about."

He stared at his hands, thumbs fumbling in his lap. "Yes. But my speech is so often unwise. The woman with Tony, she is not my brother. She cannot be." He grimaced. "She is a sister, if any, and yet to have a sister is not a terrible thought, merely strange. But if only he would choose."

"I uh, I don't think that's really on the cards. Uh, I think he's both, so you might want to ... think about it that way. Uh, get used to it being like ... that."

Thor rubbed his eyebrows. "Did I know him at all? Did I know my family at all? My mother, she has always been grace and light. She is a good woman, the best of mothers, the wisest of the court after my father, and oft easier to approach. I admired her. I thought her the best of all women. But my bro -- my sister was hurt, h--she writhed with it, and our mother took pleasure in it. Such pleasure."

He shivered, and Clint felt kind of bad for him and mostly just wanted to shake him. Had he just never ever looked? Thought about it? It was probably on purpose that they'd kept the wool firmly pulled over his eyes. Thor was a bit of a dick, but he had a righteous streak miles wide and Mjolnir was pretty hefty. Loki probably couldn’t bet that when the chips were down Thor would be on his side, not Odin's or whoever, either.

Divide and conquer.

"Never before have I feared her. Never before have I had cause to fear. Yet my brother was not at all
surprised by her rapacity, and that is the worst of all." The next sigh made him shudder and the stool
squeal with the force of it. "Why did my brother not tell me of these things?"

Clint shrugged. "At a guess? He wanted to protect you from exactly the reaction you're having right
now."

"Always I thought I was the protector. Always I felt it was my burden to bear, and yet neither of you
are surprised. What else do I not know, friends? What have you kept from me?"

Thor had a glare like lasers. It was kind of impressive.

"Tell me."

He exchanged another set of glances with Banner. "Well, there's not a lot, really. Most of it's
unverified, I don't get to talk to him much, but," yawning deliberately, "I have a suspicion that he
actually does want you to be king. And that if he goes back to Asgard before you're king, he'll die.
Maybe a 'mysterious accident'. Unless you're prepared to sacrifice something to your parents to keep
him alive."

Thor's eyes widened in horror. "They would not!"

"She, uh, she doesn't have much problem using, uh, Jormungandr that way, so ..." Banner sounded
like he was talking from experience as much as anything else, which, yeah, Clint figured he was.
"You've already given up a lot for him, haven't you?"

"Much." He shifted uncomfortably. "More than I would have him know. It is not his burden to bear.
The building of the wall was not the only threat of execution laid against him when we were
children. I ... paid, dearly, for his life." Thor shrugged. "I was untrained, and I did not yet have the
mastery to wield Mjolnir, much less call for it in need. My options were few, and so I fought an
opponent I could not defeat." He sighed. "I paid, my friends. I paid, and I do not regret the price. I
regret only that it was not enough to keep him safe."

Clint narrowed his eyes. "You're talking about the Svarta-something guys, aren't you?"

Thor lifted his head, somewhere between shame and humour. "They remembered when I wished
they would not. I suppose he paid in turn, also, but I would have preferred ... ah, it does not matter
what I would have wished. Our parents have been so -- so good to me. They love me, and I them. I
know this. I love him, and he I, and I know that, too. And yet I do not know what to do or say.
There are so many wrongs between us."

God, the guy was lonely. Clint had to wonder if he'd had real friends before in his life. Probably not;
friends would've made it harder to keep him under control, and the warrior guys probably didn't
count for much given the whole 'heir to the realm' thing. It was classic abuse profile, honestly. Isolate
the victim. Must've pissed off the queen something fierce that Thor and Loki kept talking to each
other.

"Yeah, but it's not like he's not speaking to you. I think he wants to give you a chance and you keep
fucking it up, basically. You don't eat some guy's leg because you hate them, I mean, that just -- that
makes no sense."

Thor chuckled. "It is part of healing, my friend, when the damage is too great, and the will too weak.
The flesh must return. That he used his Jotun ways to do so -- I do not know what to think of it. I
merely trusted the touch of his hand, once again, as I have always. The healing given me was his."

Banner coughed a little. "You knew he could kill you, or did it just ... not cross your mind?"
"I did not think of it," Thor said, broad and honest.

"Even with --?" He raised his eyebrows. "Wow," Clint said, studying him thoughtfully. "You're really close, aren't you? I mean -- you're close." That kind of instinctive trust just didn't happen by itself. There was history behind it, a hell of a lot of history, and whatever else Thor said about Loki lying his little ass off -- and god, the kid was so full of bullshit his eyes might as well be brown most days -- Thor had obviously relied on him a hundred, maybe a thousand times without ever doubting Loki would pull through, and it went both ways.

"I am told I was a quiet child before my brother was handed to me. I watched him grow, and he smiled for me alone, and calmed at my touch, and asked for me. He spoke my name first of all, and when he was harmed, when he was joyful, I was the first he sought. However the trouble he caused, however his defiance, however his deformities and weaknesses, his strange arts, the truths he would not speak and the lies he did speak, I loved him most of all. I still do." Thor was a little wry when he smiled. "Adopted he might be -- Jotun he might be -- woman he might be -- he is brother of my heart nevertheless."

"Ever told him that? I mean, uh, just ... like that, like you just said."

"No. It is -- embarrassing."

Clint laughed. "It might be worth a bit of embarrassment. But you might want to leave out the bit about it being in spite of everything. That's not going to go down well."

Thor shrugged. "I must come to terms. I have not yet had time to do so. As it is, I am not sure I could say so without losing my words and provoking him instead. He is very good at riling me."

"You know kids do that to avoid uncomfortable conversations, right? It's easier if you're yelling at them than if you're being nice." He thought back to his brother. "Especially if you're being nice and it's like it's out of nowhere."

"Yet again it seems I must control my temper." He sighed. "I control it, and control it, and control it, and yet it matters not a whit. I am too strong for this world, friends," matter-of-fact. "You are all so delicate, and your atmosphere cards through my hands easily as my mother's threads; to destroy your land takes no more than a thought, to shatter your livelihoods less still."

"Is that a threat?" Clint said.

"I need not threaten you at all," Thor said, smiling. "Yet you find strength to lecture me, to conceal yourselves from me oft and in great variety, knowing this of me in your limited mortal understanding, and that, too, requires my grasp upon my temper, that I do not crush you as valour demands, that you know my strength and do not speak to me again."

"But, uh, you won't, right?" Banner grimaced. "I'd ... rather not bring out the other guy. I mean, demi-god versus him, I'd, uh, not want to put any bets down, so, uh, let's ... not."

Thor flexed his hand, studying his knuckles, and there was something endless in his amusement, something so much older than they could ever know that ran chills down the backs of Clint's arms. "Demi-god," he said softly. "I have heard you speak of me so many times, as if wishing it softens the truth. It does not; and moreover, it insults me. Such insult to either of us is unwise. However well you feel for Loki, however you and I are friends -- we are gods, and greater than you will ever discover."

Clint held back the memory of Thrym. Reserved, slow-speaking Thrym, who tore his daughter free
of a sealed can designed to withstand crushing pressure and nuclear bombs with no effort at all. *You have heart,* Loki said. *Oh, yes,* he'd said later, his fingers cold as they traced down Clint's nose, bizarrely parental in his affection. *You will have your distraction.*

"I got the impression you wanted peace with us," he said once he'd forced down the shudder. "You're talking like it's impossible."

"As long as we are here, I feel it is," Thor said soberly. "It cannot be otherwise. We are too great to remain in peace. Yet I know not when I will ascend the throne, and I know not of my mother's wishes. Perhaps I should know; perhaps I should not attempt to discover her intentions. But she threatens my brother so easily, and I do not know why."

"She's pretty, uh, fixed on him going back to Asgard," Banner said. "I get the impression you have, uh, mindcontrol?"

Thor licked the air, like he'd found a bad taste in his mouth. "No. It is not to impose will. Merely that if a mind is disturbed it aims to restore the balance, so the true self can be found once again."

Clint leaned his chin on his folded hands. "And who decides 'true self'? Not the patient, I'm guessing."

"Naturally not," Thor said wryly. "Generally Eir's decisions are paramount. Eir has ever disapproved of my brother's resistance to her will, and it has ever been my protection that has spared him correction. I wonder now if that was a mistake. I wonder many things. Most of all I wonder if my life -- my family -- my mind, my life, my inviolate certainties -- are as water, destined only to leave me lost and confused in their wake."

"You're used to relying on Loki," Banner translated. "And now that's, uh, not really working."

"No." Thor spread his hands. "I am unsure if what I saw of my mother was true, or a trick played upon my eyes to gain my sympathy to his cause. I am unsure if it was ever wise to allow his speech, as he has so moved you to sympathy. He lies, and I know not how it is that he speaks so contradictory, and yet I do not always know when he lies. Sometimes I do. Often I do know but cannot find evidence of it, and I wish there were. It would be much easier to dismiss these uncertainties. I cannot believe our mother would be so malicious."

Clint shrugged. "She told you the bedtime stories too, didn't she?"

"That was not malice," he said. "Oft I told them to Loki myself. I did not know he was Jotun; I knew only that he was my brother, and he was so persistent in his need for learning and scrolls, and would not sleep when his body bid him. But though she knew, she did not stop me. I -- I am not sure." He studied his hands for a long while. "It is not a trick, is it, my sister's face?"

"I don't think so, buddy," Clint said. "Sorry."

Thor closed his eyes, somehow very kingly. "I thought not. Ah, brother," half-murmuring with a kind of resigned fondness, and a swell of underlying emotion so deep and powerful Clint got the impression it was meant for only one person, that he was seeing only the edge of something too vast for him to understand. He had no idea anyone could love like that, but it wasn't quite love -- it was something more than that, deeper. "How difficult you are."

"Your mum's kind of, uh, I don't know too much about it myself, but uh, she's a bit ..." Banner made awkward faces. "She, uh, the whole ... control thing. Is she ever, uh, involved?"

Thor nodded. "She weaves their threads, and smooths their minds into balance for Eir's speaking. It
requires little effort on her part, and is one of her greatest strengths."

Clint tried to decipher that and really, really didn't like the answer. He didn't like any of this anyway, but damnit, if they could stop being creepy, that'd be cool. "So if we told you she'd been doing that to Loki on a regular basis?"

"She should not," Thor said. "Loki is -- delicate enough, without interference. You say she has been?" alarmed. "She should not. Not alone. Loki's mind is ever treacherous. Was she well?"

He just stared. "She brainwashes him and you're more worried about her?"

Thor scowled and got to his feet. "Loki can master other minds without aid. He needs no spear to do so, merely words. If she has been so close, it is no wonder he turns her against me. I would have words with my brother."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Whoa, there," Banner said, stepping squarely in front of Thor and cleaning his glasses on his shirt. "Why don't -- why don't we, uh, talk this out a bit."

Clint levelled the bow at Thor's back. "Sitting back down and explaining would be a great idea." So maybe he was a bit stupid, considering he didn't have a Hulk to hand. Whatever.

Thor turned, eyeing his bow and arrow with totally undeserved condescension. "Do you not see? She would not behave so if she were not driven to it."

"So it's, uh, his fault? That's ... that's nice." Banner gave a short nod. "That's nice. Easy."

"You accuse me of cowardice?"

Banner put his hands in his pockets, wearing that strange little smile Clint still couldn't decipher. It had to suck, being invulnerable, knowing you couldn't even kill yourself if it came to it. It probably had something to do with that, and the way Clint seriously doubted Thor could kill the Hulk, and other things Clint didn't yet have the clearance to know, his psych evaluation was taking a while.

"Yeah, I -- I think that's what I'm doing, yeah." The smile deepened. "You know, uh, going off and blaming him is ... a dick move, pretty much. Because, the thing is, we've, uh, established, that he tries to protect you." Banner came forward, and for all that the top of his head barely came up to Thor's nose, there was something quietly frightening about him. "How about you run with that instead? See where it takes you. It's, uh, it's not a terrible theory."

Thor was studying Banner like he'd never seen him before in his life, and Clint had to hide a smile. Everyone thought it was the Hulk that made Banner scary. It wasn't. It was Banner. Hulk in the hands of someone less controlled, less intelligent, more kind, more gentle, would be an entirely different creature and they'd all be dead and the world razed to the ground by the Hulk's indiscriminate glee. All Hulk, all the time, and the man wouldn't even exist anymore except for the mean streak and nastier grin.

Clint was willing to bet that it took a fuck of a lot of nasty to sit on the Hulk the way Banner did. The guy went into war zones like they were playdates, for fuck's sake, and there was video of him just walking through gunfire and shrugging off bullets and grenades and whatever was thrown his way. Not video of the Hulk. Banner, wearing the same calm, complicated smile.

"There is some merit to what you say," Thor said grudgingly, and sat down. Mjolnir stopped vibrating in the corner.

Banner nodded, sucking on the inside of his cheek. "So, uh, Agent Barton, want to put down the
"Sure, doc," Clint said easily, taking off the tension, because it wasn't the first time he'd worked with people who just couldn't or wouldn't die. "I'd hate to ruin your gear, anyway."

"Uh -- yeah. Yeah, you would," Banner said, chuckling and unassuming. "Tony wouldn't like it. So, uh, Thor. I, uh, I think it's interesting that you assume that it's Loki doing the ... driving her to this stuff. Because, uh, my impression was that you were the one who, uh, pulled rank on her."

Thor blinked. "She is my mother," he said simply. "She is not to defy me. Now that I have come of age I obey her commands as I wish, no more, but it was a courtesy between us that I would listen to her words when she offered them. Do you blame me for this?"

"No, no, I just have a question, I guess. How old were you the first time you realised you could make her shut up whenever you wanted her to?"

"It was nothing of the sort," he grumbled. "You present it in such an ill light."

Banner gave a slow nod. "Yeah, that's not an answer. So, uh, how old?"

"Four, perhaps three. Of what concern is this?"

Clint hissed through his teeth. Damn. No wonder she was so much goddamn trouble. No wonder Thor was so spoilt. If she had to listen every time he told her no, of course she had to resort to Nat's way of doing things. If she couldn't control Thor openly, then just by obligation to her kid she'd have to do it indirectly and hope no-one noticed. He probably gave her so much goddamn practice steering him out of trouble and smiling all the while that it didn't even occur to her not to do it when she didn't have to, because of course she always had to.

He kind of wished he could set up the queen and Nat to have a proper sitdown together. Have tea or something and just ... talk. Nat had to claw out of it with a lot of practice and a hell of a lot annoyance for SHIELD, but she'd managed. Wasn't likely to happen though.

Thor had swung from annoyed to puzzled. "She was ever willing to serve our father. I truly do not see your direction."

Banner raised his eyebrows. "If you really can't see how she'd, uh, hate having to obey a four-year-old, then, uh, I don't really think I can say much."

"She was glad of me," Thor said, and Clint kind of envied that kind of conviction. If he didn't know better he'd say being wanted by their parents turned every kid into a spoilt shit, but it wasn't like he had a decent survey pool or anything. "I was difficult at times, but I apologised, and she forgave me. She told me so."

Clint didn't doubt Thor. He also didn't doubt that she'd said so with the exact same smile she'd worn while stabbing Fury in the face.

"Move on," he mouthed. They weren't going to get through to Thor by hammering at it like this -- Thor was the kind of guy needed to think about stuff to come around to it.

Banner nodded and pushed his glasses up his nose. "One more thing, uh, did the same go for Loki?"

"Loki?" Thor's eyebrows wrinkled earnestly. "I do not think so. No. But he was always very persuasive, and the effect was the same."
And again all Clint could say was: damn.

That explained where he'd learned it. It explained a lot. If they had to manipulate each other all the time, competing for Thor and Odin's attention and jockeying for top spot day by day, it explained why he liked it so much when Nat was honest, and why he responded so well to Fury. Fury pulled shit, but he didn't hold it over people's heads like that, and Cap wouldn't know how to pull shit if it bit him.

It made sense of a lot of things.

But it didn't make sense of why he still even tried with Thor. It couldn't all be explained by brotherly love -- Loki was attached, not stupid. He had to know Thor was a hot potato doomed to explode, temper and hammer and all.

Oh, that sneaky little bastard.

Learning from his mum, indeed. Thor on the throne would summon Loki back. And Loki would be perfectly placed to whisper in Thor's ear. And of course Thor was perfectly primed to listen to someone who smiled and professed love and lied like breathing and was always, always there. There was a gap and all Clint and Banner were doing in feeling obligated by the threat to Jormungandr and Thor's obtuseness to at least try to get Thor to understand what was wrong with the perfect family picture all they were doing was breaking the picture further, and it'd be so easy for Loki to step in and take the queen's role of glue and whispering viper.

Clint was starting to just find the whole thing with Loki constantly finding ways to win to be really, really hilarious, and he couldn't help laughing. Competitive little shit wasn't satisfied with a draw, he wanted to come out on top all the damned time. It was so fourteen and vindictive and kind of adorable.

"Okay, you know what I think? I think you and Loki need to have a conversation, yeah. A proper conversation. But I also think you need to get used to the idea that Loki wasn't the only one lying to you. You're -- you're gods, but basically, nobody's perfect. Your dad's not perfect, your mum's not perfect, you're not perfect. Anything that looks like it's perfect is lying its ass off."

Thor stared at his hands, examining his palms. "But it was," he whispered. "You do not know Asgard. It is gold and light and beauty, a land of peace and green. The citadels are of white and gold, and our lands are resplendent in their abundance. The waters ever flow, and the smallest flower knows glory. We were perfect."

"Past tense is, uh, kinda ... like that." Banner hunkered down in front of Thor, pushing at his glasses again. "You can, uh, still be a good king. I'm sure you will be. It's just ... not what you thought it was."

"Then of what am I to be king?" Thor closed empty hands tight. "What is Thor?"

Clint slung the bow over his back and clapped his shoulder. Dangerous move, but Thor looked so beaten down right now. "A good guy. You'll get there. It's always hard finding out stuff, but most of the time it works out okay."

Banner nodded. "We're ... not trying to hurt you, but, uh, we probably are. It's more that it's, uh, personal history again, and, uh, the way you were talking, it sounded like you were blaming Loki for ... everything, again, and I don't really, uh, like that so much. You're, you know, I think you want to be better than that."
"A lot's his fault, for sure," Clint said. "Starting with trying to take over the world. But a lot isn't either. Figuring out what's what -- hell, we're as lost as you are on that one. But basically it's worth doing, even if it's just so we can figure out what to do with him. We, you, everybody. I mean, you know, it's ... I think you're doing pretty well, actually, considering. You're a douchebag, but most people are when they find out this kind of stuff."

Thor shook his head and to Clint's surprise, leaned into his hand, setting his rough jaw against the back of it, and Clint couldn't help but pity him a little. They were practically babies, both of them. "I am not alone, is your meaning?"

"Definitely not." He squeezed his shoulder. It was a bit like squeezing an armoured leg of ham, but the thought was there. "God knows I was a douchebag to Phil about it until Nat laid into me. Well, I thought I was just teasing, but turns out I was whacking a bunch of sore spots."

"He was --?" Thor blinked up at him. "What exactly?"

"Gay. His partner was a cellist. But yeah, basically he liked sweaty naked times with dudes. Well, that dude. He made Phil happy as a clam."

He blinked again. "Do you mean to say Loki --"

"Dude, I don't know that. I don't want to know." Clint made a face. "I'd have to start shooting people on principle, and I hate that, so I'm just gonna not ever fucking ask. Just saying I was a douche, you're a douche, I'm an ex-douche. Point A, you've just got to talk to him to get to point B and capture the flag."

"I'm, uh, I'm not sure I entirely agree," Banner said, lips twitching.

"Okay, fine, I'm an ex-douche on that score," Clint corrected. He thumped Thor's shoulder and got a numb hand for the trouble, but Thor smiled. "Just, you know, try to be less of a douchebag to his face. We'll get you pamphlets or something. There's pamphlets for this shit, right? I swear I remember I got weighed down with a ton of them at circus."

"No, there's a few." Banner got to his feet. "I'll, uh, print up some."

"Clint," Thor said, very serious. "I would speak to my brother. Will you arrange it?"

He considered him. "Don't you need more time?"

Thor shook his head. "Not for this."

"Hmm. Okay." Clint eyed him. "You're getting supervised, though, and the minute it gets unproductive I'm hauling you out of there. And Mjolnir stays out of the room."

"I accept."

He was even willing to put the hammer down. Wow.

Clint thumbed his comm. "Hey, Cap? Loki up for family visitation? No hammer, supervised?"

"I'll wake him," Cap said, and there were cranky murmurs and a bit of snapping back and forth that basically added up into Loki being a groggy shit and Cap being a goody-two-shoes and winning through force of niceness. "He says it's okay. We'll hold it in the cell, all right?"

"Sure, Cap." He thumbed it off. "Let's walk back," Clint told Thor. "They'll be ready when we get
there. No flying. And for fuck's sake, if you have to rehearse or something, do it out loud so I can tell you when you're being stupid."

Thor got up, Mjolnir flying easily to his hand. "You bestow great service upon me, Clint," he said solemnly. Too solemnly and much too sincere. "I hope to be worthy of it."

Clint waved goodbye to Banner, who was making faces way, way too relieved not be about the fact that they were encroaching on his private science time -- he probably wanked to equations or something, Jesus -- and let the tent flap fall behind them, walking upwind so Thor's cape wouldn't smack him in the face. "You know, when you do the sarcasm thing, it's kind of creepy."

"You are not the first to say so," suspiciously cheerful, but one look at the blinding grin confirmed that yeah, Thor was fucking with him a little. "I suspect neither will you be the last. I have not learned nothing of my brother, after all."

These two, seriously. Way too alike.

"You're not going to go off about your mum at him, are you?"

"No." Thor was grim now. "I will ask the truth."

Clint padded alongside him, grateful that this time Thor was actually noticing the height difference and bothering to stay slow enough for Clint to keep up. "You're the one who goes on about how much he lies, and you're just going to ask straight out? Isn't that a bad idea?"

"I see no alternative. I know he is a liar. But I would not have our mother make a liar of me. I would know if she has. I would know what I have to apologise for. There is much, you see. There is much, and yet I would know if she poisoned him from the first. I would know if I caused her unhappiness. I would know many things, Clint. First and foremost I would know the name of my sister."

Clint tripped over his own feet, surprised.

Thor paused, lifting an eyebrow. "You are clumsy."

"No, just ... that's a hell of a turnaround."

"I see no other choice. Loki wills as Loki wishes and Loki does as Loki wills. My brother speaks insincerity. He does not wear it, and that is as it should be. Should he show me that form when I ask truth, I will have my answer."

"And a sister?"

"And a sister."

It seemed too easy. It was too easy. "You're going to ask for something."

Thor was striding onwards. "I wish to know who placed him upon the throne. If it was our mother. I would know what she said to twist my brother into the creature I fought, so desperate he flung himself into an abyss. I shall have words with her, friend Clint. Many. It merely depends which."
Chapter 65

Chapter Summary

Writing these two reminds me of my own sibs.

Loki was deeply asleep on him, curled under a blanket and snoozing with her head against his hip, and Steve stirred, trying not to dislodge her as he yawned.

"Aww, go back, go back, you were so cute," Tony said, sitting up and doing something with Jarvis that involved a lot of blue-toned schematics. "You really weren't down long, were you? Have some coffee or something if it won't wake her up. It won't, will it? Shit, maybe it will, supersmell and all. No coffee. Have some tea or something, I'll bother the nurse."

"No, don't--" But it was too late, Tony was already calling, and Steve sagged a little to the inevitable, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. "I don't need a lot of rest."

Tony rolled his eyes, and Steve felt the usual mix of exasperation and pleasure that someone knew him well enough. "No, but it's nice, isn't it? Did you have a good chat? I didn't hear much, I was snoozing and, like, drooling on my pillow or something, tell me you didn't see that, but yeah, it go okay with the glossies?"

"Yeah." Steve yawned again and settled, Loki a gently-snoring dead weight, almost lukewarm and still disturbingly light, but at least there was some more solidity to her now. "We talked. I think we talked. Mostly she, ah, had strong opinions."

"Vain little shit," Tony said. Steve was fairly sure he didn't mean to sound so fond.

The nurse distributed coffee and biscuits and made concerned faces at Loki. "How is she?"

"Oh, you know her?" Steve exchanged looks with Tony. "From when Tony was here last?"

The nurse smiled. "Oh, yes. Such a sweet girl. She must've been tired."

Tony yelped. "Sweet? Sweet? Are we talking about the same hellfiend?"

The nurse was unimpressed, picking up the empty mug and gathering a tray of what was probably food but had been demolished, probably by Tony. "That's a bit rude, Mr. Stark."

"Sweet?" Tony said to himself when the door shut, somewhere between baffled and horrified. "Christ, they've been mindwiped or something."

Steve couldn't help a grin. "Oh, she's not too bad."

"Oh, my God, she's infected you too." Tony pointed accusingly. "I'm pretty sure this is subordination. Wait, no, suborned, you've been suborned, this is terrible."

"Tony. You like her too."

He made a horrible face. "Do I have to?" Steve kept smiling. "Oh, shut up. She's still a hellfiend, by
the way, that's staying, I'm pretty sure that's permanent."

Steve watched him work for a moment. It wasn't so different from the rows of women bent over telegraph machines, muffens pressed to their ears and fingers quick over keys, sending messages back and forth across the front. Small hands. Quick hands. Tony's hands weren't small, but they were fast, and Steve supposed Jarvis was built for him, not the other way around. "What are you up to?"

"Working," Tony said, settling more comfortably in the bed, and Steve had to admit that he'd never seen anyone take a broken back and shattered thigh with more aplomb.

Tony was probably used to being in a constant state of pain what with the reactor and all, it had to hurt, but that raised questions about just how much, just what he was used to that riding with the buggy jarring broken bones for two hundred miles only made him faint when the automobile stopped, pale and sweaty with almost none of the incredulity that Steve would've expected.

He guzzled coffee and gestured, saying something incomprehensible that Jarvis nonetheless obeyed. "Just stuff for the company, mostly. I'm the head of R&D -- research and development -- so there's a lot I have to sign off on. Pepper's the CEO, she rides herd on me, but mostly I just play around, see what works, what the other guys come up with. Shit, most of it, but that's how it works, you get an idea and it works out and sometimes it just doesn't, but if you give it to somebody else they make fucking gold out of it, etcetera. Mostly I just tell them to pass shit around before they hurt themselves. And there's the interns. I don't supervise them directly, but I get reports and I have to read that shit too."

Steve actually didn't know much about what Tony did. It was easy to guess he was a mechanical genius like his father, and he'd worked on Steve's armour and shield, but past that he didn't know a lot at all. "You sound ..." He tried to search for a good word that described the fact that Tony was working, had been working even before Steve fell asleep, and was seemingly perfectly coherent doing it while he was in a hospital bed and by all rights drugged out of his skull. "Busy."

"That's how I roll," Tony said, gesturing to Jarvis. "I'd be fucked if my hands were messed up, but they're not, so I can keep working. Silver lining and all that. Jarvis, show me the dermal. Yeah, yeah, no, that's just shit." Tony plucked something out of the blue and threw it into another blue thing and swept some of the blue aside, the space filled with green. "I'm kind of not that great at not working. I mean, what else am I gonna fucking do? I'd invent like ... better nukes or something again, let's just not go there. So, you know, I work, I bother a shitload of people. Besides, Fury would kill me if I started fucking my way through more of the SHIELD agents."

"Ah, more?" He raised his eyebrows. Steve wasn't unfamiliar with fraternisation, but he'd started to think Tony was, well, a better person than that.

Tony was glaring. "You're like two seconds away from calling me a slut, you know that, right?"

Steve winced. "No. No, I mean --"

"You're really, really not the first." Tony was working calmly, even if the grin he flashed at Steve looked wrong. "My roving dick's kind of a tabloid staple. But yeah, no, SHIELD agents are part of a very small group of people that don't actually get freaked out by glowing shit in my chest, so ..." He wobbled a hand. "There's some overlap. Besides I think half of them have been assigned to keep me in line at some point. I've fired a long, long line of pretty assistants, let me tell you."

The concept of it bemused him a little -- it was hard for Steve to match Tony with the Tony Stark he'd been told about. "They were watching you for that long?"
"Fury was friends with Howard," Tony said absently. "His way of keeping tabs on me, I bet. I've seen him around. Mostly when I was so far under rock bottom I probably thought he was a purple people eater or something, but yeah, he's stalked me for decades."

Howard was so obviously a difficult subject for Tony, and Steve -- Steve and Howard had been friends. Howard had been reckless and careless almost to the point of cruelty, but he held himself back more often than not, channeling it into brilliance and models of things that were so far advanced of the time Steve sometimes wondered if Howard had just been born far, far too early. "Perhaps your father asked him to look out for you."

"No," Tony said, a refusal so flat and simple it took away everything Steve wanted to say, but he opened his mouth anyway. "Just don't."

Loki stirred against him and Steve glanced down, distracted, into hazy green eyes and an angular face. "Hello there. Sleep all right?"

"I believe so," Loki said, groggily rubbing her eyes. "I remember nothing of it." She yawned and settled back down against Steve, drawing the blanket up over her shoulders. "Remain as you are, Captain."

"There's your marching orders, Stevie." Tony was laughing at him.

Steve sighed and let Loki prod and poke until he was bent into enough of a pretzel for her comfort. But she warmed against him, and he gingerly touched her shoulder.

"Are you doing that?"

"Naturally. Go to sleep." She pinched him and closed her eyes, so buried and twisted under the blanket she looked like some sort of worm.

"Chop, chop, Steve," Tony smirked. "Can't keep the lady waiting."

"Fuck off," Loki said, and then snored inelegantly.

Steve caught Tony's exasperated look and smiled a little himself. "You do like her."

"Shut up."

It took a while to sleep, but the warmth sinking into his bones made it easier than he'd thought possible, and he drifted into nightmares.

It was simple. Nothing more than a memory of immobility. Of crushing and creaking, and no human voice, and pressure, and endless dark and a cold that never, ever, EVER, ever, ever ever EVER ever ever EVER ever ever ever ever ever ever and ever. Ever. EVER. Ever ever ever went away. Forever ever ever and ever.

Nothing was real. None of it.

He was still down there in the dark. He was dreaming the voices. He was dreaming, oh God, he was dreaming and he was going to wake up and he'd still be down there again. No Peggy. No Bucky. No-one. No-one.

"Steve. Steve. Steve. STEVE."

"What?" Steve didn't understand.
"Okay, just, you were freaking me the fuck out for a minute. Uh, like -- I dunno, hold on," and Tony's stick extended, the claw on its end grasping a glass of water, and Steve took it gratefully, embarrassed that he'd been obvious. "Good thing Argue-Argue's still down."

She was still snoring peacefully, a little of her nose and one foot poking out now, but not much else. "How long was I asleep?"

"Not that long, a few hours maybe." Steve tried to avoid Tony's inspection, but couldn't stop feeling like he was a slab of meat at market. "You got a dark and tortured past or something?"

Steve twitched a smile, still too unsettled to do much more. "I thought you did your research."

"Yeah, but I'm asking. Don't I get some credit for asking? Like, isn't that how it works? I do the asking thing and you do the telling thing?"

Steve realised Tony probably hadn't ever had cause to try to pretend he didn't already know everything. It made him a little glad and a little sad. "You are socially maladjusted, aren't you?"

"Oh, fuck yes," Tony said, relieved. "So come on, tell me what's up, don't make me be nice again, I can't be too nice in one day, the world will end or something and you'll cry on me and be like 'Tony, you could have saved the world! To-neeeeee!' And then I'd call you Captain Planet and we'd do the opening sequence thing and, no, let's just not go there ever."

Steve ignored most of the chaff in Tony's talk; the more time he spent with him, the easier it was to pick through the bluster. "It wasn't my life before the serum, if that's what you're asking. I don't have much to say about that. It was when I was sleeping."

"Or, you know, not actually sleeping." Tony grimaced. "That's -- that's pretty good nightmare fuel, actually, just thinking about it. No kidding. But you're not thinking about it right now, right? Wait, no, I'm not helping, different topic, different topic. Shit, I need more coffee."

He thumbed the nurse call button, and when they came in they gave Steve a look so severe he self-consciously patted the top of his head. "Ma'am?"

"What are you doing with that child?"

Ah. Loki was in the underlayers of the armour, the shredded straps curling on the floor, and snuggled up on top of him, almost interlaced, in an extremely, extremely compromising position.

"Nothing, ma'am," Steve said, falling on honesty.

"What are you doing with that child?"

Ah. Loki was in the underlayers of the armour, the shredded straps curling on the floor, and snuggled up on top of him, almost interlaced, in an extremely, extremely compromising position.

"Nothing, ma'am," Steve said, falling on honesty.

Tony snorted. "He's the last guy on earth to be inappropriate. Especially with a kid. Especially with Loki. He's just too fucking nice." The nurse kept staring, and Steve felt a slow flush rise to his cheeks. It did look very bad. "I swear I've been watching them the whole time. They've just been sleeping, and seriously, lady, this is SHIELD, check the cameras if you care so much. I'd like to see you try to move Loki when she doesn't want to be fucking moved. Does she look like she wants to be moved?"

The nurse stared a while longer. "Hmpf." But they came back with coffee and even gave some to Steve, and he was careful to thank them.

His comm crackled, and he listened to Barton, meeting Tony's eyes.

"This is a shit idea. You know that, right? Like, this is a shit, shit idea." Tony shook his head. "So shit."
"We should ask," Steve said, but he gave the top of Loki's curly head an uncertain look. "I don't actually want to wake her up."

"Yeah, she hasn't been sleeping." Tony grabbed the stick again. "I'll do it. You can be the good cop."

He shifted a little in case she woke up angry, but Tony was surprisingly gentle with the claw, nudging her shoulder little by little until she stirred and blinked, somehow very, very young for the creases on her cheek and the ruffle of her hair. "What?"

"Thor wants to know if he can talk to you," Steve said, figuring it would come easier from him than Tony.

She pressed her lips together, sleepiness gone to a kind of vibrant wakefulness that spoke of nothing good. "Does he."

"You don't have to," Tony said.

"I rather think I do." Loki shuffled off him, pulling the blanket around her. "You said the armour for this form was ready."

"Yeah, you want it brought up? You want it brought up, don't you. Hey, random guard dude at the tent. Yeah, you, bring up the girl armour. Yeah, all of it, come on, it's not that heavy, I know I fucking improved it, don't complain, don't -- just bring it up here. I want to hear 'Yes, Mr Stark' from you, all right? Can you do that? Bring up the armour. And then ...? That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Loki was smiling, rather like a pleased cat. "You have the temerity to say I run roughshod."

Tony rolled his eyes at her. "Yeah, I'm a douchebag. We covered this. Douchebaaaaag. Except that I, unlike you, am an adult douchebag."

"And so far from your consequences."

"The fuck does that mean?"

Steve cleared his throat to interrupt. "Barton says Thor's agreed to leave the hammer and I'm to supervise the meeting with him, and if it goes bad at all we'll intervene. Does that sound all right?"

"Yes," Loki said distantly. "No doubt he shall flee at the sight of me."

"Why don't we give him a chance?" He tried to look reassuring. "I can be in the cell with you in case, if you like."

She examined him, then nodded. "Do so."

"Miss High-and-Mighty Argue-Argue, do stop being a dick to Steve." Tony retracted the stick. "Did I get the British snobbiness right? I've spent like twenty years with Jarvis getting up my ass."

"The clothes, sir. Miss." The SHIELD guard looked and sounded very resentful, but handed through a bag that Loki stood and upended onto the couch, green silk and gold threads and leather sprawling against the upholstery, blanket dropping to the floor.

It showed that she was still quite starved and also the underclothes covered very little, and Steve coughed and looked away. "Ah, I can leave the room."

"No. I require assistance and Stark is far too incapacitated." Loki peeled off the shirt, and Steve made
a strangled noise.

"Don't peek!" he hissed at Tony, who made a face where he was staring intently at Jarvis.

"I'm not, Jesus. Go help her already, you blushing virgin knight, you."

Steve winced and got up, cleared his throat, and shuffled uncertainly, eyes fixed on the lightbulb above their heads. It was a fascinating lightbulb. Very bright. Very white. Very shiny. "What do you need me to do?"

He felt very firm fingers on his chin and he tipped his head down so he wouldn't have his jaw broken, trying to keep his eyes very firmly up still. "Captain," low and amused. "You cannot assist me in my dress if you flinch from me." But the fingers wobbled, and Steve realised how she was taking it and cursed himself for being so thoughtless.

"It's not your body specifically," he hastened to explain. "In my time it was very rude to look at any lady undressed." And Loki was definitely not one of the USO ladies.

She made a considering noise. "Very well. I trust you are not so prudish once I wear undergarments?"

It wasn't really a question, but Steve answered anyway. "I'm not quite that bad, no."

"Fine."

There was rustling and cursing and hopping and swearing, and several thumps. "Captain, help me into my leathers."

She looked very rumpled and cross, smoothing her clothes. The green suited her very well, and Steve automatically fixed her collar and smoothed the caps of her sleeves before quite realising what he was doing. "Oh, sorry."

"So it was not my shape after all," she said, raising an eyebrow. "I did wonder. Come, dress me," beckoning imperiously. "It is unwise to keep Thor waiting."

Steve wrapped leather and buckled gauntlets and secured into place layer after layer of clothing, ending in the coat, gold-trimmed and a little ornate, but something in it suited her very well indeed when he stepped back to check everything was in place. The black armour was too harsh for her, really; it washed her out, made her look peaky and ill. But softening it with a little gold against the green was a good touch.

"You look lovely," he told her.

She flashed him a smile, brushing back her hair. "Oh, I know. Come."

"What about me?" Tony protested indignantly. "I made you that goddamn armour! I got it fucking custom-made! Do you even know how many fucking leatherworkers I had to shop for your fucking privacy requirements? But I got it done. I got it done even though your fucking ranting haunted my fucking dreams and I know so much fucking couture design I might as well open a fucking label."

Loki twirled on her heel, smiling mischief. "So you did."

There was a brief wash of green over Tony's body as she touched the tip of his big toe, and the casts split with a groan and Tony sat up and poked his leg, flexing his toes happily. "You know, Argue-Argue? Sometimes you're really not that fucking bad at all."
She shrugged and made for the door. "We shall see if my brother agrees. Keep up, Captain."

S H I D E L guards fell in around them, and Steve paced her easily and waited while she spoke to the nurses and made her way through the base with more familiarity than he was really comfortable with. An enemy prisoner shouldn’t be able to navigate like that.

Then again they’d been this way so often he was sure the guards had the route memorised by now too, and they rotated on six-hour shifts.

Steve was just settled in with the sketchpad he’d still forgotten to take out, Loki crouched next to him and critiquing his attempt at what Sleipnir might look like, when Thor, tall and blonde and troubled, came up the gangway.

Loki rose very slowly to her feet and turned to him, something very brittle in her calm. "Thor."

He watched Thor's surprise, his shock and sadness, and the resignation that followed, the bob of his throat, and the silence stretched, and stretched, and stretched as Steve quietly shut the book and nodded to Barton.

"Sister," Thor said, something very sure in it, though his eyes were bright with grief.

Loki's composure crumpled and she backed away, beginning to pace. "You do not mean that. You do not mean that, how can you possibly mean that? Do you not know what this means, this gamine creature?"

"That you are indecisive as always?" Thor smiled a little. "It was always a trait of yours. No, b," and he cleared his throat.

Loki sneered. "You cannot even bring yourself --"

"Sister," Thor interrupted, and Steve watched her face go quiet and still. "Sister, I spoke in anger. It is true I don't know of this. How could I? I have not seen her before. I have not seen this side of you before. But whether you're my sister, whether you're my brother, I am Thor, brother of Loki. That will always be true."

"I am not your brother!"

Thor grinned, laughing a little. "Oh, Loki."

"What?" Loki snarled, arms stiff at her sides. "What are you laughing at?"

"Deny me as much as you like, sister. Thor sobered into gentleness. "I am your brother nonetheless. That is true whether you will it. It will always be true."

She spat on the wall between them. "Then you are a fool."

"As you always tell me." Thor's brow wrinkled. "Loki, I would ask of you, do you remember who forced you upon the throne?"

"Mother, of course," Loki said, folding her arms. "She asked me to make father proud." There was only the slightest stutter.

Thor sighed, slow and deep. "It is as I feared. She should not have burdened you so, b--sister. You were genuine, were you not, when you spoke of it as a burden? However else you lied, you were much too weary for there not to be some truth."
Loki twisted a smile, angular and wrong. "I was not meant for the throne, Thor. I never was."

"I, too, find it a burden," Thor said softly. "A great burden. I would not have had it pass to you."

"Because I am so unsuitable?" Loki snarled. "I am so pathetic, so worthless, that to sit upon the throne is to make mockery of all you hold dear --"

"Because I would not have it destroy you as it will destroy me."

She blinked at him. "What?"

"Oh, sister. You complain I never attended to you. But neither did you attend to me. I always thought you the luckiest of us. You were not fated to rule. You could shape yourself however you wished." He touched the glass. "But that wasn't true, was it?"

"No." She made an impatient noise and half-turned, toying with a bracelet. "Do you mean to say you did not enjoy your role?"

Thor shook his head. "I enjoyed it. I have always been one for praise. I have ever thrived in my triumphs, and I have had many. But to say I did not doubt is to lie, and I am not the sort. You know I am not."

She twitched a shoulder. "That is my role to play."

"Will you lie to me now, sister? Will you weave about my mind your insincerity?"

"I loathe you," she said, matter-of-fact, and there was something bright in her smile. "I loathe you beyond the telling of it."

He chuckled and lowered his hand. "Thank you. What will you do now?"

Loki scoffed. "I will not return to Asgard, if that is what you ask."

"I would not ask. I will not have you within our mother's reach until this matter is settled. I am told she has ... altered you to her liking, many times. Is this true?"

"Are you asking sincerity of me?"

Thor nodded. "If it may be given."

"The queen wishes the best of the realm's prosperity," Loki said. "She wishes harmony. She is tired, Thor. She is so very tired. If her hand slipped of a night, or thrice, or several," and she shrugged. "I was not to protest her goodwill, was I?"

"Oh, sister. She should not have twisted you so."

Loki hissed. "Do not say all the fault is hers. I too am responsible. I am not innocent, nor a victim. Spare your pity for those in need of it."

Thor chuckled. "I am unlikely to forget your wrongs. Still I do not believe it is wise for the mortals to free your tongue so. Still I do not believe it is wise that you speak so freely, alter yourself so freely. Will you not be gentle to them? They do not deserve your wrath."

Steve felt the need to interrupt. "Loki's been quite good to us, I thought."

"Yeah, not too bad," Barton said. "She's got her dick moments, but hell, I was a handful when I was
a kid, too. Everyone is at her age."

Thor studied Loki, then softened a little. "So I see. May I enter?"

"If you must," she said, moving with a smooth control that said she absolutely wasn't backing away and anything that suggested it was lying. It was bravado, Steve could see, and when she came to a stop her ankle pressed against the side of Steve's shoe.

"Thank you." Thor lifted a hand and pressed it gently against the side of her neck, thumb almost possessive against her jaw, and she twitched something like a smile, hands moving restlessly but calling no magic that he could see.

Loki leaned forward a little, eyes crinkling, and for a moment Steve could really believe them when they talked about how close they'd been to one another. "Give us a kiss."

Thor laughed and held a warning finger to Loki's nose. "Stop it," through a broad, brilliant grin. He knocked the back of two fingers against Loki's chest, too affectionate to be stern. "How do I look?"

"Like my oafish brother," Loki said after a long moment. Thor's fading grin returned, more brilliant than before, and Loki shuffled a little on her feet. "Do be quiet."

Thor pulled her into a hug, face buried against her hair, and she hissed but didn't pull away, shifting to settle closer and put her hands on his arms. "Sister. You are the same little rascal."

"Lout," she mumbled. "Fumbling, foolish, unspeakably vain, overgrown barbarian."

"Vain? I? You did inspect yourself when deep in your cups. 'Am I handsome, brother?' 'Am I desirable, do you think?' 'Will Sigyn dance with me?' 'Should I curl my hair-- waugh!' The pitch of his voice went alarmingly high. "Sister!"

Loki pulled her hand back from where she'd severely pinched his elbow. "Do stop speaking. If you continue I shall be vexed."

"Shan't," Thor said, sticking out his tongue, and danced back, chuckling as Loki tried to pinch both arms this time. "Ah, stop, stop, now," fending her off with his palms and ducking. "You are most vicious."

"Hmph." She kicked his shin with a petty little swing of her toes and folded her arms. "I find I am terribly cross with you."

Thor lowered his hands, sobering. "You have reason."

"Yes," Loki said, and Thor bit his lip but said nothing, and eventually she frowned. "You surprise me, brother. You do not protest nor defend. Is it not to come?"

"No," Thor grimaced, eyes darting to the side. "Your judgement is ever suspect, but rarely do you act without cause. However founded or unfounded your claims you believe them to be true. I know that now." He took her arms in his hands, bending to speak, trying to catch her eyes. "But I did not toss you into the abyss, brother. I did much, that is true. But that I did not do."

Loki scowled and ducked her head. "I, too, speak in anger at times," she muttered. "You did not. But neither did you speak. You allowed him to cast me out. I would have heard you, brother, if you spoke. You did not."

"No, I did not." There was a tense silence, winding fraught. "You spoke of doing it for all of us. Did
"It is as you say. I rarely act without cause."

Thor shook her a little. "You let Frost Giants into the treasury. You allowed them to believe they could retrieve the casket. Yes?"

Loki snarled. "You know this. Clearly he told you of my wrongdoing. Why do you ask questions to which you know the answers?"

"Because you were right." Thor bent, hands on her shoulders, speaking close and intense. "Your methods are as ever terrible, but your doubts -- brother, I shared your doubts. You did not think I was ready? Neither did I. I thought you wished me to ascend. Oh, sister, why did you not speak to me? You had every opportunity. My chambers, the feast, the eve's greeting -- why did you not speak?"

"As if you would have accounted my opinion greater weight than --"

"I do."

Loki stared, mouth hanging open, and she opened and closed it a few times, but said nothing.

"I do account your opinion above all. I -- I trust you, Loki. I know I am foolish to. I know I would be much more foolish if I did not."

She wrenched out of his grip, stumbling back a few steps and almost tripping over her own feet. "That was not the reason why I --" Loki clamped her lips shut.

Thor sighed, gazing upward like he was trying to gather patience, and it was only when his shoulders rose and fell again than he looked back at her. "Then who were you to convince of my faults when you let them into the treasury? When you offered Jotunheim on a platter?" terribly soft.

"You," she snapped. "It was not my --" She stopped again, and looked so close to tears Steve almost got up to stop the meeting, would have if she hadn't met his eyes, pleading in a way he was sure he should really object to, but he sat back down. "Fool. Who were you to oust, Thor? Did you not think the All-Father would cling to power? Did you not think Odin would need a reason, some pretext, your culpability in some grievous error, to keep his grip on the golden throne? You handed it to him," she hissed, advancing.

"Sister --"

"Silence. I warned you, I told you, I told you not to, I told you it was madness, and yet you did it! You risked all of us for a whim, and delivered yourself into his hands once again, and you accuse me of doubt? I did not doubt, Thor. I never did, as long as I was there to guide you, but oh, how he doubted. How he doubted my control, and my benefit to you --" She grinned, no humour in her resignation. "You proved I could not, and was of no benefit, and that was that."

Thor was staring, pale with horror. "It cannot be."

Loki doubled over, hugging herself, and Steve couldn't tell if she laughed or cried. "Once again, I must lie for your sake. Make a liar of me if you will, to save yourself, but do not believe it is not at my expense."

"Our father --"

"Your father!"
"Our father would never do such a thing!"

Loki pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes and straightened. "Fool. What do you know of Odin Borson? You, you who yearned for Valhalla when you have lived but a thousand years, and if you had been alone you would have cut my magics from your body. You yearned for valour. How do you think he yearns, Thor? How desperately do you think he seeks it?"

"The man you describe is not the father I know, nor the king I serve," Thor said steadily, though he was so white he seemed he might faint.

She circled him slowly, coat flaring around her ankles, speaking somewhere between vicious glee and desperation. "Don't you see? You begin to realise the bargain he struck, don't you? How he wishes peace, and how he has given it, and betrayed all his father taught him. Odin Borsson is no son of Bor the warlike, to wage peace so well. How it aches, Thor," she said against his shoulder, voice low and pitched to carry. "How it aches to love endlessly and be repaid only in obsolesce, to wield such power and love so well and be rewarded with naught but a fade 'til grey and twilight dim."

"I would not allow --"

"You are a warrior, are you not?"

Thor narrowed his eyes. "Yes. You know I have been so longer than I have not. Longer than you by far."

"A warrior's patience, Thor." Loki laughed, a bubbling, mad sound, and Thor spun to watch her as she backed away, shaking with such delight it crazed the wring of her hands into scraping welts on her skin. "Where do you think a warrior such as he learned patience? Did you think it was care for his people that taught it?"

Thor was swaying. "The All-Father is wise," with barely a quaver. "Why do you speak of such things? Our father is kind."

"The son of Bor knows none such, for Bor did not. Nay, a warrior's patience comes for anticipation of a reward so great it is deserving of all that comes before. Patience comes for the moment of an enemy's defeat. Patience comes for the moment of one's honour realised in the eyes of the gods."

She giggled, tongue peeking from between her lips, and bent, shaking with the force of it.

"Laufey," Thor whispered, and sank to his knees with an ungraceful thump. "Jotunheim. I had to break the peace. I had to incite him. There had to be war. The horror and desolation and glory of war." Thor raised his head, eyes bright and terribly blue. "You killed Laufey."

"Yes!" Loki blinked away tears, still giddily rocking from foot to foot. "Yes, I did."

Thor scoffed, twisting away in disgust, lips stretching over his teeth in the horrible shapes of someone trying not to weep. "How could you deny him that?"

She giggled. "Not to worry. I'm sure there's some upstart commander thinking themselves king of Jotunheim. Not quite as fitting as being murdered by your adopted son in a sufficiently dramatic fashion, or your lifelong enemy for that matter, but it will simply have to do, won't it?"

"You hate me that much?"

"No, Thor." She bent to smile down at him, very close. "Asgard does not accept a king who would murder their predecessor. You would do anything for me," Loki said. "Anything. I love you
"enough," reaching out to stroke down the bridge of his nose, "to spare you that pain."

Thor jerked back, trembling. "You did not care for Laufey."

"He bore me, brother. That body, so monstrous, that face so twisted --" She sank gently to her knees in front of him. "-- is the one I wear. I feel no obligation to mourn him. Neither do I fail to regret. How many kings, do you think, would chance us to leave time and again? How many to spare us for our sake? Would you have done as Laufey did? Would father?"

"No," Thor said, and reached for her, pressed his forehead to hers. "No, I would not. Even now I feel the marks you do not show, so many, of such regular shape. They are Jotun, are they not?"

"Yes."

"You are so, so cruel, sister. I cannot decide if you are more cruel in your joy or in the hiding of your pain."

Loki smiled. "Is it unseemly, brother?"

"Very." He exhaled. "Do you remain Loki, this way?"

"Are you asking my name?" She sounded puzzled.

"Yes."

"I remain Loki."

Thor chuckled. "To have that change as well I fear would be too much. It would be the breaking of the dam. I am so close, sister, to losing my temper most dreadfully. Your lies vex me. I would not take my father's life, nor his honour, in my hands. I would not. That honour is an enemy's. Not mine."

Loki sat back on her heels, hands falling to her thighs. "If I were that enemy?"

"Do not ask me to choose between you," Thor said, getting to his feet. "Should you hate him so, you said yourself his survival suits your tastes."

"So bitter, brother." She made a soft, satisfied moue. "How does it feel, pray tell?"

Thor backhanded her so fast all Steve could do was catch her as she flew and bring his shield up as they were thrown into the wall. It shuddered, but held. "Hey!"

"Rather like that," Thor said calmly, but he was so clearly spoiling for a fight that the guards were cocking their guns.

Loki laughed and clambered to her feet. "You are like your father."

He grunted. "Not so long ago I would have taken that as the greatest of compliments. I still may. Yet you would say it as insult. Who is it you envy so, sister?"

"You two need to stop," Steve said.

Loki circled with him, shifting into battle-readiness, and Steve had the unpleasant feeling of being the lone peppercorn in a can of wrassling sardines. "Mother, of course. She was allowed to remain quiet. She was never wrong. She was allowed to practise her weaving and advise the All-Father. She was allowed power. She is your mother. She was allowed to keep you with her. Her beloved son, the
child of her flesh."

"Don't you dare start --"

Loki growled and feinted; Thor grabbed her wrist and bent it back, and she tore strips of flesh from his arms and bit his neck, blades conjured in her hands. "I begin to think Mother is not well," Thor hissed.

"Back away, or I'm tranqing you both," Barton said. "You've got five seconds to get your hands the hell off each other. One ..."

"Nor am I." She bared her teeth. "You knew that, did you not? You knew. Why did you defend an abomination?"

"Three ..."

Thor whirled her and let go, shoving, and she skidded and kept her balance, hands humming with magic, wary as Thor touched blood from his neck. "You want to know who I envied? You. Lying, thieving Loki, full of wit and trickery, free to do whatsoever you wished. You could ride when you wished, speak when you wished, retreat when you wished. You were free. I could not take your freedom from you. I wished to. I would not. Your choice, however disgusting, however abominable, was a comfort. If I had to dance attendance, at the very least I could pretend it was in your stead, and think of what you would do. What you would say to win their favour. What would you offer to a diplomat of the Vanir, sister? Apples? Nuts? Pomegranates?"

"What? The nuts, of course."

"I did not know. I vexed them." He touched his throat again and grimaced, and Steve carefully retreated, the mood shifting once again to something much more companionable. "Must you keep your nails so sharp?"

Loki slunk closer, reaching for Thor's wounds, and he lowered his hands and clenched them, but didn't move as it closed under her touch. "Did you choose wrongly, brother?"

Thor rolled his eyes. "Of course I did. I tried to guess what you would do, but you were not at my side to whisper in my ear of such small manners."

"It is those manners which ensure your boorishness is forgiven," Loki said, eyebrows raised, and tugged Thor's collar into place, smoothing back his hair.

"I know." He caught Loki's hand, very somber. "I know. Sister, what can I do to ease you? Not forgiveness; I know nothing but that I should not ask it. But if you wish some token of sincerity, I will see about granting it."

She gave a sad little smile. "I would have you acknowledge your nephew."

Thor frowned. "I cannot release Fenrir."

"I speak of Jormungandr. I would have him free of his confines." A long shiver. "I would have you meet and look upon him not as a monster, but -- but my child. He understands speech, brother. He knows me. I would not have you believe he is a mindless brute."

"You ask much. More than any have the right or wherewithal to ask. Particularly one accusing my king of treason. Particularly one challenging me so, time and again, over the most trifling things, and failing to warn me of the largest 'til I am wounded by them. You would blame me for not knowing,
sister. You tell me these things of our father, and our mother, and I know not who to believe. I do not
know. I only know that you are wounded so deeply I cannot know its beginning nor its end, and you
will not tell me a word but that it is all to be blamed on the ones who love me. This is difficult. Do
you not understand that, you who take such pleasure in it? You take pleasure in my struggles, don't
you?"

Loki's chin wobbled and she yanked on her hand. "I thought you might say something like that. You
need not think on it, it is but a trifling matter of no importance --"

"I find," interrupting with slow, rueful humour, "that whichever your path, whatever your wishes,
however you hurt me, however you lie -- to be your brother is to make exceptions. To hope that you
will not hurt me once again." Thor kissed the back of her knuckles and dropped it. "I will not harm
him, sister. I will need to think on it, but I swear to you, I will not. If I am to be brother to a sister I
did not know I possessed it is not so difficult to be uncle to a serpent, no?"

Loki stared, eyebrows slowly pulling together. "I am not sure if to be flattered or insulted."

Thor chuckled. "In truth? Nor am I. Friend Steve, friend Clint?"

"Yeah?"

"I would know my nephew's condition. I would know the circumstances of his imprisonment. I
would see him free."

She yelped and clutched his collar, wide-eyed. "Thor, you cannot -- do forget that I asked -- it was
merely a trick to wound you, no more --"

"Must I always remind everyone that I am to be king? You were sincere in that moment, sister mine.
I am troubled by shadows and lies and the choices which lie ahead. I am troubled by you, more than
I have the heart to say. I know not if you lie, and I know not if our parents speak truth, and I cannot.
I... I am in great need of honest deed and faith well-meant. Will you not allow me this undertaking?
Will you not allow me to remember such spirit for a time?"

"If you must."

"Come, friends!"

Loki gave Thor's back a triumphant smile and nudged Steve with her elbow, biting her lips together
to keep from laughing. "Well? Shall we?"

"Nicely done, kid," Barton said, closing the door behind Steve as he trailed Thor off the gangway.
"Soooo, does Jorgy bite?"

"You dare name my son Jorgy?"
Chapter 66

Chapter Notes

References to domestic violence, some graphic. More onscreen sibling violence. Sorry about missing yesterday, was sick again.

Bruce was in love with the SHIELD hiring algorithms. Whatever arcane structure they used to test out their pet scientists, unflappability was high, high, high on the list.

Then again the Doctor Rodriguez listening to Thor and Loki talk while they towered over her and gestured alarmingly close to her head was the same woman he'd worked with for two years before his "accident". Someone who hunted live arms and toxins for a living and wrangled protections afforded to almost no-one else except perhaps Agent Hill and Fury when she finally accepted SHIELD recruitment wasn't easily intimidated.

Another popular SHIELD attribute. His favourite, actually. It was a relief to talk with other academics without them flinching or making excuses to leave. So far, anyway.

She'd always made it easy to work with her, once they got the cross-discipline terminology problems out of the way, and from what he could hear over Stark's rambling through the Jarvis interface on his phone she was attempting to do something similar with a pair of alien gods more interested in bickering and giving contradictory orders than working with her. She hadn't even shot them after an hour of fruitless effort even though half the others had to change out for new people out of second-hand frustration.

Bruce really, really loved SHIELD's hiring process. Except for the part where they'd pretty much kidnapped him, but that wasn't really hiring.

But rescuing Jormungandr would only go so far if she did try to shoot them, and her curls were distinctly frazzled.

He turned off the phone. "What's up?"


"I'm pretty sure we're not actually ... uh, focusing on that right now, more like getting him some mobility, so if you could, uh, either get back on topic or stop bothering Doctor Rodriguez until you do, that'd be ... well, great." He smiled.

Thor drew away very slowly. So he could learn. That was good. That was nice.

Loki glanced between them and giggled. "Of course," very serene. "My apologies, Doctor."

"I-it's okay," Rodriguez said, and mouthed thanks at Bruce.

He kept smiling. "Good, good. So, uh, have we figured out a place?"

"Five possibilities, sir. I'd prefer these three. Can you see my screen?"
Bruce leaned over her shoulder, following where she pointed. Interesting. "They're abandoned?"

"Disease, sir."

"Ah. Do you, uh, do you guys get sick like we do?"

"Not of your mortal ailments, no." Loki shrugged a shoulder. "Those prone to death do so."

"It is madness we fear," Thor said quietly.

"That," Loki said easily, "is not of my line, and not of my concern. I should think my son would like this position. What is it?"

" Decommissioned US military site. We can take back control of it for a while if we have to. I'm sure Tony can. The, uh, Interior administers it and they, uh, they ... always need something to do. And there weren't people there originally, far as we know, so we don't have to worry about that." Bruce glanced between them. "Who are you talking about with the ... madness thing? The Bor guy?"

"My father's father," Thor said, taking the chair Bruce pulled closer. "He was complex. Is this island not too near?"

Bruce couldn't help laughing, partially at the question and partially at Thor's very transparent deflection. "No, uh, Hawaii's used to weird. But there's this formation here off the main island. We can fly in pretty easily, so it shouldn't be too much trouble to, uh, deal with whatever we need to. Can he breathe above water? He'll need to come around South America and double back pretty carefully, or he's going to show when we don't need him to and that'll be ... problematic."

"For a time," Loki said. "I will guide him, if you will allow it."

He took about five seconds to think about it, probably three seconds longer than he strictly had to. "Well, sure, but can you swim all that fast?"

She rolled her eyes. "It is not that my son is slow. It is that he is large."

Rodriguez was already mapping a route on the screen, ocean topography scrolling past as she keyed over shipping lanes and around underwater mountains, and Bruce squeezed her shoulder in thanks and backed off a little. He wouldn't appreciate having him hanging over his shoulder either.

"Will he, uh, understand what we're trying to do?"

"He asked me to free him. Yes."

Thor started. "You mean to say you spoke?"

Loki's glare could've stripped paint.

He closed his mouth and subsided. "Of course," he muttered, folding on himself like an ashamed little hermit crab. "Yes, of course you spoke."

Rodriguez held up her hand like an elementary school student. "Yes?" Loki said, gentler and with fewer edges than Bruce thought her capable of.

"Stark's equipment down there can transmit audio both ways, and it's remote-controlled. If he can understand me, I could guide him? Or if he likes your voice better you could sit with me and we could work on it?"
Loki smiled. "You would do so?"

Rodriguez flushed. "I mean, if it's not too intrusive. Er, yes? Of course I would."

She laughed, still very gentle, and put a finger to Rodriguez's lips; Rodriguez flinched back, lips blue where she'd touched, and Loki pulled back her hand. "Yes. Yes, it is acceptable. I would be most grateful."

She smiled, somewhere between awkward and pleased, rubbing her mouth. "Okay, well, this is what I have so far, so -- oh, a chair, would you like to sit?"

"Are you not already diverted from your tasks?" drawing the chair closer.

"Oh, no. I like helping. I'm not a superhero or anything like that, I'm just a scientist, so this is very, it's fun. I'm sorry, is that insulting? I don't mean to be."

Loki rolled her eyes and tapped the touchscreen controls, fingers flickering. "Not at all. I share your pleasure. How do you plan to circumvent this on his approach?"

"Well, I thought..."

Bruce watched them become fast friends over the course of about five minutes, Loki weirdly maternal and Rodriguez eating up the opportunity to brainstorm with someone as clever as she was. He was aware of Thor's black mood worsening into a brood so palpable Bruce was tempted to introduce him to Evanescence.

"What's the matter, Thor?" he said quietly.

"I do not see why she behaves so," Thor muttered to the floor after Rodriguez relaxed enough to laugh at something Loki said, finger circling around an underwater volcano on the screen. "It is not as if she will care once the doctor serves her purpose."

Bruce winced on Loki's behalf. She'd gone quiet and still and whatever ease Rodriguez got from Loki's approval had fled to the hills. The silence was frankly horrible. "That was, uh, you know, that might be true, but it was still kinda mean."

Thor's mouth was a hard, stubborn line. "It is truth, no more. Or is there more to your indulgence, sister?" Loki went white.

"Thor," Bruce said warningly.

"How many have you lain with? What else have you whelped upon this realm?"

The chair screamed as he was thrown around and into the wall, lines appearing on his face, then bleeding, then splitting. Bruce could see teeth and tongue and the base of Thor's eye rolling in its socket.

The other scientists gasped and went still.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Rodriguez hissed. "My parents would never do that. What is wrong with you?"

Loki lowered her hand, blood rimming her nails. "I am indeed disposed to be grateful to the doctor," very level and smiling cold. "You have spent what gratitude I had for you. We spread our seed upon this earth. That is what we do. Leave."
Thor put his hand to his face, holding up the sagging ribbons of his cheek, squishing them together like jelly, and got up, dripping blood on the floor and chair, tracking over his fingers and down his wrist.

Rodriguez rolled forward. "No, he won't, not like that. Wait." Thor and Loki glared, but she folded her arms stubbornly, and Thor sighed and stayed where he was while Loki rolled her eyes.

He really loved SHIELD hiring policies.

Bruce touched his comm. "Guys? Thor just said, uh, something stupid. Again. Uh, can somebody ... come supervise too?"

"I will," Agent Romanova said. "How's Loki?"

"Pissed off," he said, considering the brightness of Loki's eyes, the twitch of her head as she murmured a silent conversation with someone who wasn't there, wound so tightly in on herself she was statue-still even with a pair of labrats trying to squeeze past her. "I think it's pretty much, uh, justified."

He switched off the comm and turned to her, unsurprised that the room was slowly emptying as the other scientists conveniently found things to do elsewhere. "You're, uh, you're right to be pissed off. But hitting him? That's not how we do things. Maybe it's fine in Asgard, I don't know, but, uh, not here. Do not hit people. Especially your brother. We'll keep him off you as much as we can, but you have to keep your hands down."

Bruce barely even stuttered. He couldn't. Thor's face was the same colour, the same watery texture, the same ripple of muscle over gleaming bone, as when his father had beaten his mother's head in while he watched.

He had a quota for being reminded of that. He had a quota for reliving the memory down to the stink of her piss and shit and the grease of her blood spraying into the air and clinging to the back of his throat.

He was over this year's quota.

Loki took a long time to respond, eyes focusing again, and tilted her head curiously. "You are not in a position to complain. Your anger is far more destructive when it manifests."

Bruce shrugged and resisted the urge to scrub his forearms raw. "I keep myself under control. You made it so I could negotiate with him a little. You, uh ... you smack Thor around whenever you feel like it. I, I don't think that's helping anything. It's ... really not helping you."

"Is this memory, Doctor Banner?" Loki said softly, leaning forward. "Who is it I remind you of? Perhaps I should compliment their good work."

"The man who beat my mother to death in front of me," he said baldly. Most of the scientists in the room would've read his dossier already, and the ones who hadn't would go through it page by page by the end of the day. "I, uh, I don't think that's a comparison you want."

"No," she said. "No, I ---" Loki faltered, frowning. "I do not."

Bruce smiled politely. "Yeah, you know, it'd be nice if you, uh, you kept that in mind and ... kept your hands down. It'd be nice."

His comm beeped. "Doctor Banner."
Bruce nodded to Loki still staring wide-eyed at him and turned to Thor.

He was frowning at the walls and at Romanova's pursed lips and Rodriquez was searching the drawers for the standard emergency glue, but Bruce knew where it'd been moved and he was really not in the mood to be next to both of them right now, so he exchanged places with Romanova.

"You might want to come here so I can, uh, take a look at that."

Thor scowled, but obliged when Bruce gestured him into an empty chair while Bruce prepared his face.

"You're kind of an asshole," Bruce told him, carefully gluing back together the sagging slashes.

"She should not play at motherhood. It is not fitting, and it is cruel of her to pretend so. You may be mortals, but you are worth more than her deceit."

Bruce made a face. "I'm more ... right now I'm interested in, uh, the whole ... 'that's what gods do' thing. Really?"

Thor grumbled, prodding his cheek experimentally. "Yes, of course we do. I spoke hastily. Again. I vow I do not understand myself at all. Only that she cannot be trusted, and the doctor must be defended from her tricks."

"I think we can handle that," he said distantly, disinfecting and re-gluing the slash Thor had prodded open. "SHIELD isn't unfamiliar with, uh, sensitive guests. But I'd advise you to, uh, not say that stuff again. It's upsetting for all of us, really."

Thor laughed, but very carefully, his hand pressed to his jaw. "Why should it be?"

"Yeah, uh, well." Bruce cleared his throat. "You said some stuff earlier that was a bit ... disturbing to us, about, uh, fighting, so ..."

"That is if one must approach. I need not do so, my friend; I need only wait." He gave a half-grin. "No, friend, it is the thought of him taking this woman's form to lie with you mortals. That is ..."

Thor grimaced disgust.

Bruce huffed a laugh. God, they had a long way to go. A long, long, long way to go. "You know, there's, uh, there's ..." Establish base facts first. "Do you, uh, acknowledge she might have a point with the whole ... not-great family thing?"

Thor raised his eyebrows and pointed to his cheek with a half-smile. "If any have cause for complaint, it is I."

He had to turn away to put back the glue and get himself some water and calm the fuck down out of the red zone. "That's, uh, I already asked her not to do that. But that's a nice way of avoiding the question."

He sighed behind him, frustrated and weirdly human. "If I say we acted wrongly -- what then?"

"Your wrongdoing is uncontestable," Loki said, sucking blood off her fingers. "Your opinion of it, however ..."

Thor groaned. "You ask me to humble myself time and again and for what? A brother you tell me never existed? We did what we thought was right!"
Loki stretched back over the chair, grinning upside down. "Ooh, do you miss me?"

"Always," he scowled. "Though I begin to wonder who exactly it was that defended me in battle. Surely not you."

"You're terribly sentimental." She padded past Bruce to tap Thor's cheek, a curious little pat of fingertips. "So, brother. What will you give me to see this healed? Come. Will you not barter with me? Is my word, mmm, not worthy?"

Thor stared up at her, eyebrows raised, then gave a sudden laugh. Loki chuckled too, lowering her hand to grip his shoulder and steady herself as she doubled over giggling.

"No," he gasped, steadying her with a hand on her hip and clutching his face as it rippled but didn't quite break open again under the force of his grin. "Nothing at all. Your word is worth nothing, Loki. Nothing."

"Because I am Jotun?"

"Because you are Loki. Insincere little witch."

"You have some sense now," she commented, laying her hand against his cheek but making no move to heal him, apparently inspecting the lines of glue.

"Why did you not tell me?" he murmured, apparently enough at ease with Loki smiling creepily over his wounds to be sad and serious. Maybe it was a ritual between them, one of those personal things like the way Betty signed off with "love you, you drunker bitch!" on her sister's answering machine. Insults that were an acceptable cover for fondness.

Loki huffed. "You proved your humour was suspect."

"A horse, brother," Thor said ruefully. "A horse. It is a little funny. You would think it funny had it happened to any other."

"Of course I would," Loki said. "But I expected better of you."

"Ah, so I was to divine your state of mind despite your very refusal to be at all in the same palace, much less speak to me?"

"Yes."

"Evading me year upon year? Was I to use one of your spells, brother, and work myself into a sparrow to listen at your bedroom window?"

"Yes. Though it would have done you no good." Loki's mouth twitched upward.

Thor shook his head. "Infuriating," he said fondly. "You still speak of me as if I have hardly the wit to bathe myself and in your next breath assume intelligence I daresay you expect of no-one else. Will you ever be consistent?"

She wrapped an arm around Thor's head and pulled him into a half-hug, rolling her eyes. "You great, sluggish oaf. I always expect better of you."

"There, you see? You do so again. I vow you are the most bewildering creature."

"Creature, is it?" very soft.
Thor sighed. "I chose my words poorly."

"Just as well I am honourless," she remarked. "You can hardly be faulted your confusion."

He pushed her arms away, stood up, and took her wrists in his hands. "I am your brother," he said, earnest and intense. "It is not that you are Jotun, sister. It is that you have lied to me time and again, and twisted me, and you tell me you hate me then seek my arms weeping, and I know not what to do. But I know this. I would not be brother to a monster, therefore you are not one."

Loki half-laughed, but bit her lip, blinking, then tried to laugh again but it came out as a croak. "Your logic is predictably simple."

"You do say I am simple," Thor said. "I hurt you often. I am aware. It is not always accidental. You know this. But you are still Loki, and you are dear to me. However conniving and cruel you may be. How often must I say this?"

"Until I believe it, perhaps," Loki said, trembling in little spates of tension. "Which may very well never occur."

Thor sighed. "I shall learn more patience. There is no worthier subject."

She yanked her arms free with a scowl, but she touched his cheek with a frown like she couldn't resist healing him any longer, no matter how vehemently she was hissing. "No more of your sentimentality. Your soft heart is so very crass and your ease in offering it is obscene. You ask it to be torn from you."

"Unmanly of me, is it?" Thor murmured, and brushed glue off his face to the floor when Loki was finished. "Odd. You never cared about my role as prince of Asgard."

"You are what I am not." Loki picked a gob of dried glue from Thor's cape and avoided all their eyes. "I've never had a warrior's bent."

"And yet I owe you my life times beyond counting. At times I am convinced you rescue me so you can mock my weakness. And yet if I were offered certain death the first time you denied me Valhalla for your amusement, I would not have taken it."

Loki sneered. "Yes, such a shame to miss your precious Sif."

"I would have missed you." Thor put his hands on her waist, thumbs easy against her ribcage, and sometimes Bruce found how close they were a little unnerving. "I would have not ... sister, I would not trade you away. I would not have. Not for all the gold in all the realms."

"You precious, precious fool." Thor leaned back as she got closer, and she used the opportunity to fold her arms on his chest, casually resting on him like he was a lectern. "What if the bargain is not for a wall, but for Asgard? If the bargain be for Midgard, what then? If the bargain be for all the worlds, against the doubtful value of my life -- what then? Would you regret and offer me regardless as your father did? Would you trade me for safety, brother? To punish me?"

Thor opened his mouth, studied her, then shook her off, grimacing. "That is not relevant. I will not allow anyone to take you."

Loki hissed and straightened her bodice. "You all seem to think you have a choice in the matter. I will do as I see fit, no more and no less; I shall decide relevance as I see fit; whether I should hold you in any regard at all is for you to attempt and for me to judge."
"Not to interrupt," Rodrigeuz said from her chair by her console, waving awkwardly as their attention snapped onto her. Sometimes Bruce suspected they were to gods as ants were to people — noticeable if they bit, irritating when they got together in large quantities, but ultimately beneath. "But actually I am interrupting. My program's finished mapping a few possible routes, so if I could borrow Loki for a minute and get her opinion?"

Bruce watched Loki's face slide into true amusement. "Why, of course. Thor. If you would remain, I could be well enough to speak with you. We could ..." She paused, telegraphing thought. "Lunch outside?"

He studied her, frowning, then nodded and sat back, thumbs playing together. "I do not understand how you are allowed such freedoms, but I would break bread with you, sister, if you would allow my thoughts to be my own."

Loki pursed her lips, then prodded him in the shoulder, dodging with a laugh when he scowled and batted at her wrist. "If you will refrain from impugning my children."

"You know I will not." Thor grumbled. "My soft heart, as you say it, will not weaken that far. I will, however, make the attempt."

"You will?" Loki sounded as surprised as she looked.

"You ask me not to lie through ignorance. That is simple enough. As for the rest -- we shall see what I make of your son, sister. I like Sleipnir well enough, perhaps I shall like Jormungandr too."

She flickered something that might have been a smile. "Sound a little less as though you speak of a litter of pups, brother, and I may believe you."

Thor sobered. "You have never seen Sleipnir, though you be his mother. As we speak of mothers --" He bit his lip and trailed off.

"Ask what you will," Loki said irritably. "I need not answer."

"Asking is the discomfort," Thor snapped, then visibly forced his shoulders down and back and opened his mouth, only to close it.

He faltered over and over as Loki's face slowly twisted into a high-handed smirk, grotesque in her canny control of one shift into another. A tick of her eyebrow here, a tilt of her chin there, and her face became centuries of contempt writ large.

"I cannot bring myself to ask. I am sorry," Thor said, and bent his head.

Loki turned away. "You want your mother to remain your mother. As mine wished for me." Thor winced.

Bruce took a seat next to him and watched as Loki smiled again at Rodrigeuz, almost eager. Romanova was listening behind them, arms folded. "So ... lunch."

"It has been some time since Loki ate with me," Thor rumbled. "He took meals in his rooms more than not but when we were together at feasts we were side by side, and he ate of my plate as I did of his. I have missed it and would rather court her temper than avoid it if it meant we could do so again."

"You would rather court a fire giant than avoid becoming a cinder," Loki said, patting Rodrigeuz on the shoulder and thanking her with an incline of his head. "More fool you. Let us eat before you
slaver and dribble."

Thor got up. "You are finished?"

"My part in this is, for the moment." The SHIELD guards fell into step around them, and Bruce followed Loki and Thor's matched strides, Romanova's hair bright between the narrow gap of their shoulders. "So, brother," slyly amused. "Will you grow up, or shall I always be your conscience?"

"And of course I must always be your reason." They shared such a close smile that Bruce felt like he was intruding on the most intimate moment in the world, and Thor twisted into sadness. "What did mother tell you, to have you take such a burden?"

"'Until Odin awakens, Asgard is yours,'" Loki quoted easily. It was the kind of easy that reminded Bruce of how hard it'd been to tell him that particular detail of his childhood. Oh, it was easy in the way that practice made difficult things easier to talk about, but it also made the reactions harder to bear. "You asked sooner than I thought you would."

Thor angled uncomfortably, not quite shoulder-to-shoulder anymore. "It preyed upon my spirit, and I fear she cannot have spoken so from love. She is Queen; she rules well enough in his stead, and has done in the past. Though Jotunheim declared no treaty she should not have abdicated her regency and placed it all upon you. Oh, Loki. It was not her right. You need not carry this alone."

She sighed, but patted Thor's hand on her wrist. "Think, for a moment, that our queen guards her power most jealously. Think on what it would do to her standing to have the most powerful sorcerer of the realms oppose her without Odin to conceal her manipulation. Said sorcerer being myself, of course."

Loki sounded very affectionate, and Bruce sometimes really had to wonder if part of Loki's isolation from his children, part of Thor relying on her so much, was that Thor just liked the close attention. Loki did lie a lot but it was easy to think the way she chose her words was friendly, and as far as Bruce saw she did know how to be a mother, possibly a good one just by being a counterexample to Frigga. She just didn't get much of a chance to show it.

"Would she have?" He gave her a very considering look. "I cannot imagine our mother wrathful."

Loki laughed, her voice smooth as it had been the first time Bruce heard it, intimately condescending. "Oh, brother mine. How is it you always ask the wrong questions? No, never have you survived by wit; you have none to spare. It is not her wrath you should be concerned with."

Thor dropped her wrist, staring at her with something like horror. "Balder was an accident!"

"Was it?" very light.

"You killed him to prove your superiority?"

Bruce glanced between them, trying not to be creeped out by Loki's smirk. "Do I want to know?"

"He was Odin's son. The rest is to be told outside," Loki said. "Else Thor will tear down your walls."

"I'm not going to like this, am I."

Loki smiled over her shoulder, sly and confidential. "Not at all."

His pocket vibrated, and he glanced at the screen of his starkphone, ignoring Tony's bristling texts at
being hung up on. Rodriguez. Ok will back u up w/fury. J too dangerous. Agree we need avengers
on case. Talking to hill abt it right now. bcc me ok?

It was always the times he didn't want to be right that he inevitably was. Was there any proof they
wouldn't be unleashing a thing that put old tales of kraken to shame? Nope. Was there proof that
even doing this would mean Jormungandr would be in a position to do a lot of damage if he so much
as twitched wrong on Loki's command? Yup.

Bruce didn't particularly like the Avengers Initiative, but he could see when they were useful. Not
letting Loki hold coastlines hostage was a good time to be useful.

He started composing the email to Fury.
I think about all the trusted adults in my life had this kind of conversation with me when I was a teenager. I was insufferable with the people I cared about.

More sibling issues but getting there.

Loki made a comical picture curled neatly in a beanbag, tray on his lap as he and Thor exchanged wary glances.

Somewhere between the lab and outside he'd changed and superimposed it on his clothes as well, and if she had to guess why she'd say it was because of Thor, sprawled on cushions being macho and noisily stripping meat off a turkey leg by tearing off fibers and pulling them through his teeth. He looked like he was having fun, as much as Loki was with the beanbag, adult-sized and one of Stark's 'specialty requirements'. Loki had examined it for a few seconds, experimentally prodding the filling, then sat down in it and promptly refused to move.

Natasha had to struggle not to laugh when they laid down a tarp and rugs in the shade and he floated himself and the bag over the floor and outside so he wouldn't have to get up and risk losing it to Thor's curiosity.

Every so often Loki shifted in entirely unnecessary ways and beamed when Thor rolled his eyes at the rustle.

She was quite tempted to introduce Loki to bubblewrap.

"So," she said, finishing her lassi, "you killed Baldr."

Thor pried at another strip of meat, systematically rotating the bone so he could get at all of it. It reminded her of how snipers ate. "He did not. It was an accident. A malicious accident, but an accident."

Natasha didn't have to try too hard for skeptical eyebrows. "You're missing the point. Did it have to happen?"

"Yes," Loki said.

"No," Thor said. "Brother, it was not your fault. I know not what she did to incense you, but --"

"Why not ask me?" Loki said to his knees, almost sulking. "Why do you never ask me why I did what I did? You say you don't know but you don't ask. You ask them and you believe them, but you never ask me. You will not believe me no matter what I say. Is that your reason, brother?"

Thor sighed. "What did she do, Loki?"

"I don't need your pity either."

"You said it was what you wished me to do. What is the matter now?"
Loki stared at his knees and said nothing.

Thor gaped at him, somewhere between exasperation and hurt, and went back to eating with a nasty mutter.

Rustle.
Rustle.

"Rustle."

Natasha put her hand to her forehead, peeking through her fingers.

"Enough," Thor bellowed. "Continue this behaviour and I shall have you flogged."

"What behaviour?"

Thor pointed at him. "That behaviour."

"What?" Loki sneered over his shoulder. "I do not see anything named 'behaviour'."

"You know exactly which I mean. Stop this at once."

"I shan't stop as there is no-one to carry your threats and I shall not bow for less," Loki spat. "Will you flog me yourself?"

"If I must, I shall take the torc about your shoulders and have at your back 'til you beg me to finish it!"

"Have at, then." Loki got up and spun, arms outstretched. "Have at, if you hate me so."

Thor roared inarticularly and stomped off, and she covered their food as he swung Mjolnir and soared into the desert. "Stay where we can get in touch with you!"

"Coward!" Loki shrieked, and Thor accelerated, landing with a billow of sand in the distance.

Natasha put her chin on her palm and raised an eyebrow at him as he scowled and settled himself, drawing up his knees. "You could just ask to talk to me."

"This is more fun." He slipped her a grin, but it faded. "Romanova."

She raised the other eyebrow and waited him out.

"Is Thor very taxing?"

"A lot. We're not giving up on him, though."

Loki munched tomatoes. "These were thought to be unclean not so long ago. Yet you serve them and recall little."

She made herself comfortable as she could be on the cushions. "Yeah, times change."

"He will bargain for me," studying the half-eaten tomato. "He believes he can force them to take me back. They will ask for some token of meaning, and it will cost him terribly and come to nothing."

She deliberately kept her eyes down and away. "You'd rather stay here."
"No," affronted. She quirked her mouth, and he sighed. "Yes. He is not so much older than I. I would not take away his good nature, however much it infuriates me. I would temper it."

"He wants to think the best of people, is that it?"

"Yes. No. It is all they dare show him, you see. Even among us, his power is great. Very great. It is that he waits to take the throne. It is that he obeys, and the realms see his devotion, and his power, and are glad that he does nothing against the word of Odin. Glad for Asgard and glad for Thor. Glad of Odin. Thor blunders, and Odin controls him, and that is as should be seen. You do understand, do you not?"

Natasha took a lassi out of the fridge and held it out to him; after a moment, he took it. She understood. She also understood that Odin was a shitty handler, and if he'd been at SHIELD, he'd have been thrown out of supervision two days into his first op. Interdependence was good. Reliance on each other because the supervisor was intermittently abusive and all-round unreliable wasn't. "What do you need from me?"

"He should not suffer needlessly. I show him my son, and ... your sagas speak of Thor's death at his jaws. I would not have this caused by Thor's unreason, nor my son's. However they will tell you of my motives, I do not free my son to punish Thor. I would not do that to either of them."

"You don't see a way out of going back, do you?" She considered him, the way his long fingers picked at each other. "The queen doesn't need you to cooperate."

"She has many plans," Loki said, predictably cryptic. "Among them the restoration of Jotunheim as a ... civilised ... realm. I am Laufey's heir, and I am capable of using the Casket. She will perhaps offer it as a gesture of goodwill. Worse, she will convince Thor it is right."

Natasha shook her head. "I'm guessing how the giants feel about it isn't in the picture."

"No. Nor is it in mine, but I will consider them if it will hinder her plans."

"That's honest," she said, and reshuffled the pillows for better support. It was important to the conversation that his eyeline was above hers. Not as a function of inevitable height, but a function of choice. She was willing to show trust if he was willing to return it, and to a degree it'd been successful so far. "I appreciate it. It's boring when mercenaries pretend they're there for honour when really it was higher-paid."

Loki laughed. "You name me a soldier of fortune?"

Natasha grinned back. "I am. Aren't you?"

"I was never Russian."

"Hail Rasputin," she said, Cyrillic flowing off her tongue. "You knew perfectly well what was wrong with his son and you had no intention of saving him. Did you just like seeing someone love their son the way you wished Odin loved you and punishing them for it? Your mother fucked a syphilitic dog and got you. You were born a weal." She leaned on her elbows, half-smiling. It felt good to speak her language again. Even if it was about this.

Loki giggled, sputtering against a wrist he held to his mouth, eyes squeezed shut and leaking tears as he continued to laugh. "I like that," he managed before he launched into another fit. All it did was confirm her suspicions.

Travelling monk who couldn't heal a haemophiliac boy but was said to survive a legendary death
even when he didn't?

Please.

"I was bored. Pretending to wear his face amused me. His confusion when he heard of deeds he did not do was very amusing." He smiled toothily. "And yes, yes, you are correct. Is it so very wrong?"

"Don't ask me questions to make yourself feel better. You are directly responsible for my existence."

"Do you blame me, Romanova?" He sobered. "You look like your mother."

"As far as they know I was born in 1982," she said. "I think I told you I put a lot of work into maintaining my appearance."

"So you did."

Here was the thing about her and Loki, the thing she couldn't explain to Clint but he took on faith anyway: he would have done exactly what he threatened to do to her if he'd had the chance to make it happen. Not because he didn't know how much it hurt to be raped and beaten by someone he trusted, how much it hurt to be that person forced to do it against their will, but because he did.

She could respect the lack of empty threats. It meant he took her seriously.

It also meant that when he was reading her notes upside down he actually was reading them, but that was an aggravation for later. She'd tried speaking Russian to Thor; he'd sounded the same as ever. English, and archaic. But now, talking to Loki, she realised that he'd been speaking Russian to her since she had, and sounded a little less archaic. "How do you understand us?"

"All-Speak." Loki switched back to what Natasha guessed was his own language. "It is a creation of a cabal of magicians. We understand and are understood. But your languages change, and we have not lingered overmuch on Midgard, and it cannot maintain accurate translation if we do not give it the experience. I have given it experience; others generally do not have the skill. How do I sound to you?"

"And we have not lingered overmuch on Midgard," she replied. "I don't know what you're saying, but that's how it translates."

Loki frowned. "I sound like that? No wonder you all comment on it."

"All?"

"Ah," He waved a hand. "I have had many pets in my times here. I speak of one in particular, from some --" He puzzled to himself. "Four centuries of your reckoning. He was exquisite, but also remarked on my speech."

Natasha studied him. "Does it bother you? Not having slaves?"

"You assume I do not," Loki said.

She glared.

"I do not," he said, grinning. "I do not, at this moment, possess pets. But it is for lack of time, not inclination, and your Barton served well enough as a companion for the days I had him. To answer you -- yes, it does perturb me. Who performs the filthy necessities if they are not compelled by their station?"
Natasha studied him, knowing he was aware of her close examination, knowing the pinched lips and flared nostrils were in anticipation of her conclusions. Filthy necessities were one thing. But it sounded personal, and slaves, before the changing attitudes cheapened their value as skilled labourers in crafts unknown in most of Europe, were not worked as body servants to their lords.

Loki loathed himself. Loathed himself so badly that he considered the duties of a body slave attending him to be one of the worst things he'd ever ordered anyone to do, though she highly doubted that he'd ever demanded more than sleeping in the same bed as a lordly defense against attack. Loki hated himself too much to touch himself; enduring while someone ordered to touch him, and most probably trained to pretend enjoyment, a mask that would have cracked under touching his cold for too long, would have only made it worse.

Hate like that ran so much deeper, had its basis in so much more, than being adopted and raised to hate his own race. It wasn't shocked discovery that Thor described in his fight with Loki, described in how Loki had let go -- not fallen into the abyss, but deliberately let go -- it was confirmation of despair.

All Odin told him was that he was right to hate himself all along, and that there'd never, ever been a way to prove to anyone that he was worthy enough to think of stopping.

He probably hadn't the slightest idea how sex could be consensual.

"I haven't brushed your hair as a woman yet," Natasha said, answering without really answering. It was a gift, really, trusting Loki to pick up the details of what she didn't say -- and she trusted him to pick up that particular detail of it, too. "It's a lot longer. Takes more time. My hair's curly too, and I had it long until not that long ago. It was a bit of a bother with all the tangles if I didn't brush it."

Loki narrowed his -- her -- eyes, but slowly shuffled to turn her back to Natasha, an arm across the top of the beanbag, hair spread across her back. It was the dropping of an illusion, not a physical change -- the air of it was different -- and even though she was tense, it was still an improvement from before.

"I hadn't noticed," she said, and she flinched when Natasha showed her the comb she was going to use, but didn't jerk away when Natasha touched her back, firmly and with no stealth, and started on the ends, ringlets shifting across leather as Loki shuddered and stilled.

"Is this all right?"

"Yes. Imbecile." She closed her eyes as she said it and made a low soothed noise. Natasha wrote off the insult as automatic peevishness.

"Am I very taxing too?" Loki mumbled, breathing so slow and steady Natasha thought she was half-asleep.

"Clint doesn't call you 'trouble' because you're easy to deal with," Natasha said, keeping her voice low, evening out her pitch so she didn't startle her. "You're trouble, but I've seen worse than you. Seen them, slept with them, killed them. I'm really not the best one to ask."

Loki lifted a shoulder on the opposite side to the lock Natasha was working on. "I don't want to be redeemed. There's no reason to. I just wish people liked me. Would let me try to show I could be ... that I'm not ... I try and it all goes wrong and no-one understands. You don't understand either. Don't pretend you do."

"I wasn't going to," she said, settling herself cross-legged to take some pressure off her knees. "I am
going to say that half the reason we do this isn't about morality. I'm not about morality."


She nodded, knowing Loki would know she did. "Yeah. There are things that SHIELD has generally agreed not to support. There are things I don't support. But ethical objections aren't the same as personal involvement, and someone else in this situation, someone that wasn't likeable, we'd treat them worse. I definitely wouldn't brush their hair."

"Likeable?" Loki said, somewhere between hope and wariness.

Natasha finished smoothing a section of hair, not missing the pleased little purr as she drew the comb down her back, checking for final tangles before she moved onto another section. "Sometimes, yeah."

Loki wrinkled her nose, eyes still closed. "You're fools." She snuggled deeper into the beanbag, giggling at the rustle. "Does that bother you?"

"A little bit," she admitted.

"Oh, good," sounding tremendously pleased with herself and grinning against the backs of her folded hands, and Natasha slowly brushed out her hair. By the end of it Loki was soundly asleep, her face more open -- and squished in anathema to her usual prickly dignity -- than Natasha had ever seen her.

It took a long time for Thor to say anything from where he was standing some distance away, arms folded in envy and confusion.

"I would give anything for my brother," Thor rumbled in what Natasha guessed was his effort at lowering his voice. "Anything. I would undertake every quest, retrieve every treasure, destroy every army for him to smile at me again the way he did you. No pain. No hate. No need to escape me as though I am a wolf like Fenrir, slavering for flesh. And I have only made it the worse in my attempts. Have I not?"

Lying in kindness was the worst thing she could give, and she didn't entirely hate Thor. "Yes."

"Am I to diminish, then? To remain only the warrior Thor with no talk of brotherhood or family?"

"I think," still very slowly brushing her hair, "as long as you talk about his children that way, you've answered your own question. What do they want you to do, Thor? Why did you come back down here? It wasn't because you missed her."

Thor gave a long, exasperated sigh. "I -- all right. Yes. I am not here entirely of my own accord. This is a test of my fitness for the throne. Another, I suppose. I am to resolve Jotunheim to their satisfaction. They linger, and are wrathful."

"And she's Jotun, and she can use the Casket, and she's Laufey's heir. And Odin exterminated all their sorcerers in the last war."

"Yes." He spread his hands. "How do you know this?"

"We pay attention," she said. And it was what she would have done, faced with an enemy that could do what Loki could. Leave that power in the hands of a subjugated people? Might as well hand them your own head on a pike.
Thor muttered to himself for a good few minutes, starting and ending with the bothersome interference of mortals in godly affairs.

"Can they reach you right now?"

"They may."

"Do you know they will?"

"Of course they will," Thor said, with the self-assured narcissism she'd come to expect of princes and 'fearless leaders'. Stark was exactly the same way. "They loathe us, and would exterminate us given the chance. We must act before they do."

Time for this song and dance, was it?

Lucky for Thor she had the routine memorised, or she'd actually be irritated.

Natasha raised an eyebrow. "I seem to recall a certain wall. Did it fall down?"

"No, but --"

"Do you have no preparations for being attacked on your own land?"

"Yes, we are well-defended, but --"

"Would they be able to reach anyone?"

"Of course not, would you stop interru--"

"So you're either going to kill them for their own good or kill them for your own good because they might possibly at some point attack a city you say they couldn't hurt anyway with resources they don't have?" She lifted the other eyebrow.

Thor started to growl, then glanced at Loki and checked himself with a forced breath. "Then what do you suggest, wisest mortal? Do nothing?"

"Yes."

He sputtered. "That is nonsense. I must act --"

"Do you have to really? Or is just for the sake of looking like you're doing something?"

Thor tilted his head. "Would you ask me to lie?"

"I'd ask you to think about what you're trying to achieve. You might've noticed we war against each other quite a lot. This country's in the middle of something similar now, and I've seen a lot of others. Take it from experience: starting a war to make yourself look good never, ever works. It's what you do after someone else does it that might work. Still chancy, but it might."

"You suggest there are alternatives," Thor said, frowning like she was sticking him in the middle of a polisci 503 lecture. "What could they possibly be?"

Natasha shook her head. "It sounds like they want them dead," she observed. "Do you want them dead?"

"I wish no more death," Thor said, pained. "I am not so thirsty. I once roared beneath my father's
banner and wore the aspect of the wolf, but no longer. As king, I will choose my own advice. But I am not king."

"It's good to get some practice," she said noncommittally. "Have you thought about talking to them? Loki's pretty capable, so I'd assume the rest are too."

Thor grimaced. "I would rather not think of her in that light. Or them. But I suppose I must." He rubbed his knuckles over the bridge of his nose. "You have done this before, have you not?"

"Talked people out of massacres?" Natasha inclined her head. "Yeah."

"That is not --" Thor bit down hard on his tongue poking between his teeth and closed his eyes, blood slowly staining his bottom teeth and running along the inside of his mouth. "I am not accustomed to mortals with something to say. Much less accustomed to mortals worth listening to."

She tipped her head at Loki, still snoring quietly and probably listening by now. "I got the impression you mostly think of us as ants. Maybe children."

He shrugged. "Well, yes. That is what you are." Thor's brief panic was almost funny. "I mean to say -- that is what you are to Asgard. My thought has changed. Perhaps not enough to suit you, but it has."

A suspicion fell together from a collection of threads and rattled in her head. "Before you were banished, had you ever had a conversation with a mortal? Like we are now?"

"Not exactly," Thor said. "Perhaps. But not in this depth. It is not polite to discuss matters of Asgard with sla," and he cut himself off and strained for a word, flinching a little. "Mortals."

So the only real contact Thor had with people was with servants and slaves, and she doubted he had much in-depth to say to mortal kings then or now. Fury had told her, privately, that they were aim for Thor's uninvolvment in specifically American defense at all costs lest they started something they really couldn't handle. She doubted he ever really had much to say to women in or out of bed, either.

That lack of interaction explained so much about how truly sheltered he'd been. For him all of this was equivalent to if a light switch started complaining about being used for its intended purpose and biting her finger when she tried.

Talking to them probably felt as ridiculous as if she bent down and apologised to the surly light switch with a long speech about treating it like it was a person too even though it was still a switch.

It wasn't acceptable that he'd been raised to so efficiently dehumanise and depersonalise everything other than Asgard, and it didn't make anything less offensive, but she was willing to cede a little of his confusion to pure cognitive dissonance.

"I will consider what you say," Thor said, somewhere between arrogant and pleading. "I cannot promise more. You may be right. But how do I speak to a Jotun?"

Natasha couldn't stifle a laugh. She'd heard this before in a different flavour but with the exact same frustrated resentment. Many, many times. "You talk to them like they're people."

Thor cocked his head, and if he had a claw to grapple the concept with, he'd have sprouted it from the crease between his eyebrows. "It cannot be so simple."

"It's worked quite well with us so far," she said mildly.
"Yes, but ..." He cocked his head the other way, deep in thought. "I will consider this. Do I pretend they are of Asgard?"

"Do you pretend we are?"

"You cannot be, no. To do so is to give credence that is not your due."

Natasha let the silence stretch as his eyebrows drew in so close and deep they almost touched. "Do you ..." His throat worked with a different kind of uncertainty. "Do you think they would speak to me?"

"If you brought them something they wanted, yeah."

"The Casket," he said to himself. "It ... it may be possible. Do you truly think so?" he pressed. "If you are wrong, the consequences would be most dire."

"Don't make this about me," she told him. "I'm telling you what you could do, not twisting your arm. You're the one who decides."

Thor gave her a strange look. "To decide for myself ... Truly?" He stared into the distance. "Loki wrought great destruction, true; but neither did I tell him it was wrong. I began the war, and he destroyed Jotunheim. That consequence is not mine. But the consequence of beginning the war is still mine. To avoid it would be to destroy Jotunheim in entire, and that I will not do. Therefore, I must do something else. How goes my thinking?"

He looked like he'd never so much as been responsible for a kitchen knife before, and was both terrified and thrilled by the prospect. She suspected it had a lot to do with what she'd been told of his pleasure at serving food to Doctor Foster, his easy acceptance when she scolded him.

Being held accountable for such small things was probably as refreshing to him as it'd been to her after Clint took her into SHIELD. "Not too bad," she said.

"I will think on it further. But to think such is possible --" He shrugged and twisted Mjolnir's strap in his hand. "It is as new as all of this. Neither is it a terrible thing. Only strange and traitorous. I know it should not feel so to think of what I would do as king and believe I can act as king, and not my father's regent, but I find it does. As though my every disagreement is a betrayal of his love and trust." His pensiveness turned irritated. "Though I still do not like the way you speak to me."

She smiled at him, very thin. "I don't like the way you speak to me either."

He hesitated, then inclined his head in the stiffest half-apology she'd ever seen. "I will not leave for some time yet. I would, if you were not averse, speak with you further on this once I have thought. Will you? We could repeat the game, perhaps?"

"I don't know how much more help I can be, but when we said what we did, I was part of that, and I wasn't lying about answering what I could. Just don't expect me to be all that sympathetic. Cap's the one you want for that."

Thor smiled, but it was humourless. "I suspect I have had quite enough of sympathy. It obscures poison far too well. You are kind to Loki," he said gruffly. "I see it."

"I don't do it for you."

Thor snorted through his nose, tone acerbic. "Clearly not. My comfort is not your desire, and it is that for which I am grateful. Thank you," very stiff.
"You're welcome," Natasha said, and found that she meant it when she got tired of his hovering and gestured to the cushions on the other side of Loki.

If Thor could learn to think a little, he had the potential to be likeable too. Whether she would think anything of it depended on how he dealt with Thrym.

She was looking forward to that. Just a little bit.
Chapter 68

Chapter Notes

Still unwell, sorry about the delays.

References to sexism, past child abuse, discussion of child abandonment.

"Stop that now."

Tony heard Romanova's annoyance, ducked out of the tent, took in the situation, and inflated his lungs. "GUYS."

He gave a very manly yell, accidentally threw his coffee at Thor's head, and stopped dropped and rolled as a bolt of magic sizzled the sand at his feet into molten glass, heat almost broiling Tony's shins as he kept rolling and swatted at stray sparks, finally coming to a stop when he got a faceful of Loki's leg.

Note to self: don't startle brawling teenage gods, for fuck's sake. Even if one of them has their little brother in a stranglehold. Had. Intervention successful.

Tony dabbed at his eyebrows, cringing at the ash on his fingertips, and glared up at him, squinting against the light. "Jesus, hypervigilant much?"

Loki twitched where he was crouched, hands out and flat, the fingers curled, head jerking wildly between all of them, and Tony bit back curses.

Great, he'd startled the kid out of about two weeks of progress.

"I'm --" A douchebag, blah blah. A forgetful douchebag actually in a position to know better than to freak him out in the middle of fighting with Thor. Fighting, arguing, getting beaten into the ground, same difference. "Sorry," he said instead, because being right at Loki's feet was either the best or the worst place to be if he had a meltdown. "Just -- okay, you know what, focus on my finger, okay, just focus. Focus focus focus ..." Well, that was boring. "Hocus pocus pocus focus focus pocus hocus ..."

Loki's withering contempt as he eventually straightened up and lowered his hands was actually a relief, the shift from one to the other passing across her face like an afterthought. "What the devil are you blithering about?"

"I had to think of something," he said defensively, trying not to piss himself with happiness that Romanova was putting the guns away and that Thor hadn't said a damn word after the first two times Romanova shushed him. Not dead. He could sacrifice a little hair for not dead. Even if he was covered in sand. "Anyway, come on, help me up, I need to pick your brains about Jorgy."

Loki scowled. "Either name my son as is proper or not at all."

Tony thought a moment. "How about Mundy?" Laughing at Loki's pointed sneer was a great way to burn off adrenaline. "No, seriously, okay, come on, the kid's fucking huge. We've got practical issues that I kind of don't want to get done without you at least having an opinion, because I'm pretty sure that if we cut him in half without asking you'll kill me."
"Your death would be the last step," Loki said agreeably, toeing his ribs with the point of her boot.

"You owe me clean clothes," Tony informed her. She looked really, really tall when he was literally at her feet. Way too goddamn tall. Was it something in the water in Asgard?

"Oh, do I?"

"Look at this sand. Sand, Argue-Argue. Sand. Do you even know how hard it is to get rid of this shit?"

She stared at him, lips quirking. "Well, in that case," Tony let himself be hauled to his feet and stood still when told, wincing while she swatted sand from his shoulders in probably the nastiest way ever. It still felt kind of good -- he hadn't had somebody do it for him since MIT and Rhodey swearing at him after an experiment went wrong.

Thor grumbled behind them. "You need not hit so hard, Loki. 'tis rude."

Tony smirked and turned around, holding out his arms so she could get at his hips. Swat, swat, swat like he was an annoying fly. But that was the thing: if he really was an annoying fly, it'd only take half a second for her to punt him into the ground so hard his skin sheared off. The fact that she was only mildly bruising him said a lot. That and she was doing it in the first place.

"No way, are you kidding? That's not rude. I'm the rude one, and I'm not competing with you, Argue-Argue, get that out of your head, I refuse to be responsible, ow, ow, ow. You're the nice one, act like it." She swatted the back of his head again but ruffled her fingers through his hair, the back of his neck prickling when she pushed his head back with a fingertip to his forehead and rubbed her fingers over his nape. Fucking gel, picking up everything. "It's your fault anyway."

He toed off his shoes and shook them, despairing of the inners. Ruined. Ruined, ruined. Oh, well. At least Loki got to calm down a bit, and he half-suspected she liked screwing up his hair, for reasons of being three parts troll and one part would probably set a cactus on fire just so she could mother it afterwards. It was like she was getting in all the practice she could.

Once he was desandified he skirted the shattered mug and the cooling lump next to it, unsurprised that Romanova was already guzzling water inside. It was fucking hot out, and the heat Loki's magic gave off didn't help.

He took his seat, grateful for the fresh coffee. Probably Bruce. He had to think of something nice to do for Bruce. "Anyway, if you're the nice one, Thor is..." Tony considered him. "You're Peter Pan."

Thor looked like he didn't know if to be offended or not. "I do not understand," he said slowly. At least he'd got to work off a little bit of temper.

"Nobody understands that story, get used to it," Tony said and ignored the mutter. "Seriously, nobody, Barrie was crazy and kind of a pedo. Or, wait, no, is that Carroll? No, that's definitely both of them, it's like a club or something." It occured to him that this was a really bad choice of tangent with both Loki and Romanova around. "Never mind!"

Thor really was going to have to get used to the fact that Tony was already compromising as much he was ever would for anyone that wasn't Pepper. It wasn't like he actually expected Thor to keep up.

"Have some coffee, sit down, everybody sit, you'll make my neck hurt. I was an invalid like a day ago, I'll get a bed out here if I have to. I'm serious, sit the fuck down. Smoothies if you want them," he said to Loki, and willed her to take the offer. They needed her to level the fuck out; she'd calmed
down, sure, but swinging between rage and contempt and near-tears like this wasn't helping anybody, least of all her. Thor was making broody faces, too, and there had to be a rule, like, one emo god at a fucking time.

He gave up on getting them to sit -- herding fucking cats, seriously -- and crowded her to the blender, ignoring the affronted looks she kept giving him. Ignore, ignore, ignore.

"Here, see, we've got mango. And fucking kiwi. Want some fucking kiwi? 'cause, you know, nobody else wants it."

"Without the copulation, if you would," she said, jerking back from the finger he snapped under her nose when she got lost in the distance. "I ... without ..."

Oh, shit, she was getting watery again.

"I promise I won't call him Mundy," Tony said. Christ, there were tears, actual tears, what the fuck, and he willed everyone else to look the fuck away and let Loki hang on him, so fucking tall she was sniffling into his hair.

"Okay, okay, not Jorgy either," awkwardly patting her arm. "I mean, it doesn't even scan. Jormungandr, though, that's great, I mean, Jorr-MUN-gaaah-andrrrrr-ackgh," and he coughed a little, trying not to strangle on his tongue. "Okay, I can't do that, you know, the fancy letters, don't laugh, keep it to yourself. God, I spooked you, didn't I? You know, I scared you shitless, it happens but I don't have to be the one doing it, there's enough of that shit already, right? Shh."

"You are so nonsensical," Loki muttered, and Tony was careful not to tense at the touch of her hand to his neck, at the pricks over his spine and fuck, were those barbs? "It was not deliberate?" she said, snotted up and still creepily earnest.

Right there was the mad, bad and dangerous to know Loki he remembered from the helicarrier, and Tony -- well, he didn't let go of her. Not a fucking inch. "Yeah, me. Seriously, Argue-Argue, what's up?"

"You are ... fond of me?"

She sounded honestly, totally like it was a surprise to her, and Tony reviewed the last few minutes and caught on with a curse. "Yeah, okay, you can just fucking ask instead of threatening me and snooping around in my head. And for the record, the answer is no, I'm not so much of a douchebag I'm going to cut off your kid's tail just to spite you. See? Asking works."

"You, you --" she sounded confused. "You." Loki wrenched her hand back and stepped away, staring at him.

Tony touched the back of his neck. He couldn't feel anything much, just a pair of fleabites, but he wasn't in the mood to be charitable. "Yeah, me. Seriously, Argue-Argue, what's up?"

"You are ... fond of me?"

She sounded honestly, totally like it was a surprise to her, and Tony reviewed the last few minutes and caught on with a curse. "Yeah, okay, you can just fucking ask instead of threatening me and snooping around in my head. And for the record, the answer is no, I'm not so much of a douchebag I'm going to cut off your kid's tail just to spite you. See? Asking works."

She hugged herself. "What would you have me do, then? You allow me to speak to my son, and you allow me to find him, but you do not tell me of what you would do. This is not a bargain, mortal."

"We'll make a new one. Do you just not have disabilities on Asgard?"
"Rarely," Loki said. "If they acquit themselves well enough. Few do."

"Okaaaaay, so you have no clue what I'm talking about, you could just ask, but well, you know what, you don't need to, come here. I'll introduce you to the shiny, shiny world of prosthetics. See, like, my suit is a prosthetic of awesome."

Loki tipped her head with a frown. "Prosthetic? You spoke of amputation."

"Wait, you seriously thought we'd just cut it off and let him drag around like -- you know how there's people who are like 'baby, your self-esteem's in the toilet, you might wanna fix that 'cause not everything's about you?' You need those."

"I have had many parts consigned to the garderobe," Loki said, way too cheerful for the topic. "It has not affected me overmuch. The few who survive the loss of limb are often those lashing themselves to another's back to continue the battle 'til all enemies are felled. It is a mark of courage, no more."

"Not always, sister." Thor lowered himself onto a stool and looked pleased when it didn't creak or break. Tony would've been seriously pissed off if it did -- he'd had them all specially reinforced. "Tyr is no more or less than he was before your son took his hand."

Loki sneered. "There was little enough of him to begin with."

Thor made hurt faces. "Must you malign all your siblings? Tyr's silence has ever defended you."

"You have more brothers?"

Loki stared at the blender like if she glared hard enough it'd show her the mysteries of the universe. "It generally does not matter if one suffers the loss of a part or six," she said eventually. "Either one dies honourably or one does not."

Tony didn't even know what to do with that. All it did was confirm that explaining his chronic pain to their godly worldview would be like trying to explain algebra to marmots. "You know, on the self-esteem front, maybe we could start small, like ... you're not actually fertiliser, how's that? Later. We'll do that later, I'll get somebody to draw pictures. I'll make Steve do it. Here, you know what, have this."

He handed her a tall, frosty tumbler of smoothie and waited her out. It was kind of a crucial moment. Either she'd find a fixed point along the lines of remembering when she'd had the exact same drink before, or she'd keep swinging and he'd have to shoo the others outside for quality time, and he fucking hated quality time. It felt like he was in some kind of weird coparenting mess with the rest of the team and Fury being Superdaddy to Coulson's Supernanny and he didn't sign up for it, damnit.

She didn't smile at him when she lowered the glass and he half-wondered if his heart was going to stop and he actually would have to replace it entirely with the reactor. He just needed her to be stable just long enough to last the meeting. Even stable like acrobats on stilts were stable would be okay. He was prepared to lower his standards. Not that he had high standards, obviously, look at his team for starters.

"This is delicious. Clearly your taste is suspect." And there she was. Kind of mean and a total pain in the ass and nowhere near as intolerable as him on his worst day but never letting it stop her from trying her damndest to top him. Right there in the little crinkles.


Fuck, he wasn't supposed to be able to tell godly-sneer from teenage-sneer. He wasn't supposed to be
able to tell the slight difference in stance that meant she might not go straight for the jugular on people that weren't her family if they talked fast enough. Tony definitely talked fast enough. God. Didn't that mean he liked her? He actually kind of liked her. That was so wrong. He hadn't even forgiven her for the window yet.

If he thought about that he was going to get pissed off, and all their egos were getting crowded already, packed into the tent like this.

"Okay, so, prosthetics. No idea when you were here last or how much attention you bothered paying to the puny mortals, but stuff's kinda changed in the last few decades. No small credit to my genius, of course, but -- you know, it'll be easier to show you. Jarvis, Jarvis, I need some help here, load stuff up for me. Today's discussion is what the fuck we actually plan to do with Mundy! I mean, Jorrrmuuuungandrerrrrargh," he drawled off her glare, just to make her roll her eyes and correct him with that little smile that always seemed to calm down the twitch. "Come on, Jarvis, show her what we mean."

That led to twenty minutes of fascinated Asgardians, image searches, an impromptu discussion of cybernetics and watching Aimee Mullins run race after race with lots of impressed commentary from Steve, who turned up halfway through and got sucked in telling stories about the war and what they'd done for the boys coming home back then. From there they detoured into military hospitals, more videos and a frankly depressing discussion of landmines, IEDs and their differences (though briefly, he didn't want to give either of them any ideas), but got back on track with a story about Agent Carter's sister. They detoured again when they got to videos of the lifelike prosthetics being made in all their scarily realistic glory and Steve asked if they were made of people. Which was really gross but also kind of illustrative of the shit he refused to outright say about HYDRA's labs.

Eventually, though, they wound down as Mullins gave a post-race speech, still heaving for breath between exhilarated grins.

"You can do this for my nephew?" Thor had his arms folded, staring at her, but the way he was beaming ruined the forbidding image, and he clapped Loki's shoulder, rocking the table with the force of it. "Sister, did you hear?"

Loki was more reserved, but she nodded. "I heard. Stark. You spoke of practical matters."

"Yeah, uh, that's my cue," Bruce took over, and Tony was glad to let him and wander to the blender while Loki went into protective mama mode and made Bruce explain exactly what they were going to do to her precious baby for the first of what was probably going to be about eight million times.

Tony rubbed the back of his neck, grimacing. God. Gods, really, and they stood out among the others like a pair of geese in a chicken coop, all leather and self-possession. Loki might be a kid but she was snapping at Bruce like a slightly prettier version of Gunnery Sargeant Hartman and Thor was nodding along, biceps bulging at appropriate places. Tony couldn't quite decide who he was flexing in defense of, but he sure as fuck knew a) it was distracting and b) Bruce didn't deserve the grilling he was getting and c) the whole not-listening-to-Romanova-until-she-stuck-them-with-sharp-things was getting really annoying.

He whistled for Loki's attention, wandering back over with a full mug. "Hey, which of us is not obliged to have anything to do with this? Uh ..." He pointed to Bruce. "Him! And you kind of need him, so not driving him off? Excellent idea. Be nice. Maybe even pleasant. Can you manage pleasant?"

"I will see my son safe." The glare said she'd happily pick her teeth with his eyeballs if it had the slightest non-zero chance of helping Jormungandr. He slurped coffee at her.
"Father will not take him," Thor said, somewhere between reassuring and totally unhelpful. "His punishment is done. It would not have had to be done at all if you changed him to be a little smaller."
Scratch that, unhelpful all the way, and Tony slipped in some rum and drank for real, eyeballing schematics as an excuse to stare through the transparencies and eavesdrop.

Loki turned the glare on him and Tony had to give Thor a microsecond's worth of props for not buckling under it. "He was growing," she hissed. "I would have rather had him thrown to Hel than damage him so. At the least she is devoted to her siblings."

"Shall I suggest Helheim, then, if Father objects?"

It could've been innocent. It could've been plain old innocence, trying to find a way to fix things. Taking her seriously. But sandwiched into the kindness was enough malice to make Tony's teeth feel like he was scraping blackboards.

Loki scoffed and leaned away from him. "Really, Thor. Restrain yourself to insulting one child at a time; as you remind me so often, there are plenty to keep you in paltry amusements. Now, Banner --"

"Do you just not know how grudges work?" Bruce said to Thor, cleaning his glasses. "I mean, it's, do you seriously not get how this stuff isn't helping?"

"I do not require your defense." Loki bristled, all scalded cat and outrage. Bruce fiddled with his glasses and looked at her the same way he did at Tony when Tony accidentally ruined his experiments. "Ahaha. Uh, more like I've had this stuff said to me, and I'd rather not, uh, be reminded, so, Thor, as the resident invulnerable monster at this table, I'm really going to have to insist that you, uh, lay off. Ferment his grudge against you on your own time. Okay?"

"I am not --"

Bruce turned his glasses in his hands and half-smiled.

Thor stared back for a few heart-stopping moments, then put his elbows on the table and stole Bruce's coffee. He didn't pout, but it was damn close.

Herding cats, seriously. "Okay!" He clapped his hands. "So, Loki. Tell me about this changing shape thing. Can Mundy shapeshift? Or do you have to do it? Is it permanent? Because he's fucking huge, if you haven't noticed. Wait, is he still growing?"

Loki shook her head. "He is too untrained to act alone, but he can hold the forms I create. It will not damage him further."

"But we're talking about physical changes, not illusions." Bruce pulled up more diagrams. "It would be, uh, a lot, a lot easier for us, if he could be permanently smaller. It's ... logistics."

"I understand," she said quietly, somewhere between lost and heartbroken and furious. "Yes."

Tony willed Thor to keep his mouth shut and winced when he opened it. If he put his foot in it right now Loki would probably feed him to Jormungandr in neat little lightning-sizzled pieces. "Thor, buddy, how about --"

"I would not wish such a fate on any creature," Thor said solemnly, his hand gentler on Loki's shoulder. "If I can aid his freedom in this realm, I shall. You need only ask."
She frowned at him for a long time, then apparently decided he was sincere and brushed off his hand. "I will not. My role in this is small."

"We might," Tony said. "I mean, we have to do something with the other half. We can't just leave it rotting in the ocean and poisoning everything, that's kind of ... I dunno, I mean, he needs to clean up his room and maid service? Definitely in order. Can you do something about that?"

Thor blinked at him. "Of course. If your portal can withstand it, such a feast would be most welcome upon Jotunheim."

Loki hissed. "You cannot be serious."

"I am indeed, brother. They starve." Thor was somewhere between sad and irritated. "I would not see an enemy suffer so."

"That's a good idea," Romanova said over the lid of the laptop she'd claimed as hers. Apparently it was recompense for all the time she spent chilling out in the tent and pretending she was giving Fury and Hill accurate reports, an earbud tucked under her collar and the other trailing wire from her ear. First thing she'd done with the laptop was lock it down. Second thing was installing Skyrim so she could make a two-handed orc named Loptr the Farter. She played on a touchpad, for fuck's sake. Willingly. It was a good thing he already knew she was bent in the head.

She and Loki were giving each other complicated eyebrows.

"Perhaps," Loki huffed. "It will have been preserved well indeed. If you tell them of its origin, it will aid you. If they have a king to decide. If you mean to be so foolish as to negotiate."

"They do," Thor said, thumbing Mjolnir's strap. "A most unhappy king, but one all the same. It would be a great gift, sister. Better than any I could muster."

She turned on her seat to face him. "You do mean to treat with them. Brother, they are a race of monsters. They have no sense to them."

Thor went on. "You can tell them of its position, can you not?"

"Well, yes. But you would be a fool to trust my accuracy. I am a liar."

"I do trust you, sister."

Loki made disgusted faces and turned back to Bruce but didn't actually say no, and Thor grinned at Tony. "If your portal will be ready, and my sister tells you of its calibration, and I may take the flesh with me -- does this solution satisfy?"

"Sure! I mean, if you're sure they'll want it. Some kind of trophy, right?" The mouldy half of a gigantic sea snake didn't sound all that appealing to him.

"They will," Loki said, quiet like she was forcing out the words. "The flesh of sorcerers' monsters is a delicacy."

Oh.

Oh, gross. And wow, and gross, and damn. Steve was giving her sympathetic eyes and Loki wasn't having a bit of it, staring at Bruce like she could will him to talk over the rest of them and Bruce wasn't having any of it either. Then she gave him the big injured eyes and Bruce caved. Candy from a baby. Totally unsatisfying to watch.
"That's fucked up," he said. "That's, uh ... well, I guess it's good for us, but that doesn't mean it's good in general, so ... sorry about that."

Steve still had the concerned face on. "Are you all right with this?"

"It is of no use to my son," Loki muttered. "It may as well do more than linger in your seas."

Tony gave her his smoothie. He didn't need it anyway, and she wobbled her head in something that would probably be thanks on someone else.

They were all carefully not looking at Thor and Tony didn't know about the others, but 'have you actually participated in cannibalism?' would probably be his first question, and there was just no way that would end well. He'd already eaten himself, other people weren't too far a stretch.

"So," he said brightly, because if he didn't say something he really was going to ask. "We've got schematics up and running and the place's cleared out, I'm lugging stuff over there now. I think that science lady has the route almost all mapped out, so we should be able to have everything going in a couple days, portal and all. But we kind of have to test it, so Thor, if you could do that with Bruce? I mean, like, you know a bit about it, right?"

Thor shrugged. "Not so much as Loki, but enough."

"Cool beans. Clear off the tables, people, we've got food coming in. I'm gonna go bother them, should've been here like ten minutes ago. Jarvis! Make Barton pick up Selvig. Tell us all about your great magical science, alien peepbeings."

Good thing he'd had a hankering for vegetarian, because meat right now? Not the most appealing.

They arrived in a buggy with the backseat full of food, and eating with the others, paper crumpling under his elbow and Jarvis running sims and Loki and Thor arguing magic with each other as much as the rest of them was kind of becoming a habit already. Not so much the arguing part, but the eating together and pissing each other off was definitely getting to be a routine.

Thor was talking circle theory and Hubble telescope pictures with big gestures at Selvig and Bruce, and Tony waved his hand in Loki's face to get her attention after she hadn't talked for a while, not even to cite some obscure point of magic theory to prove Thor wrong. It was the two of them at this end of the table, Steve squashed in next to Romanova on a beanbag and being a total backseat driver.

He didn't like the half-frown on Loki's face, the way her eyes were fixed on his broken pencil like it was the important thing in the universe. "You're far away. What're you looking at?"

"My son," halting, "I thought him whole, and you say you can solve it. And he will be free. But not the same."

Tony just wasn't getting it. "He'll be okay, Argue-Argue."

Loki smiled at him, small and sad, and when she met his eyes he thought of a shape of teeth and rage and a golden prince stretched over an outcrop of rock slathered in seafoam, entrails draped over nine jagged steps and heaped steaming beside a long tongue forked and slender and still. There was an unreality to the image, oversaturated and underexposed, lines thickly three-dimensional and the colours flat, and the perspective was both very narrow and very wide and nothing at all like human sight.

"I am a god, Stark," clear in the chatter around them, the others talking like they had no idea anything was wrong. "And still I cannot make it false. There is no truth I can give."
"It's not your fault," Tony said. Was she serious about the seeing-death thing? "I mean, if it's going to happen it'll happen, but I seriously don't believe in the fate bullshit. You said Fury was going to die and he didn't, so I'm not exactly a fan of your accuracy rate. But you know that, so why are you even telling me? Do you want funeral plans? Elaborate a little."

Loki's hands twisted together. "I would not have my son be alone. Would you defend his freedom, Stark? He liked stories, that much I know. Particularly if it is told with voices. And of a night he liked to trace figures upon the snowbanks, and if you could find some small bay to sun himself --"

"Hey. Hey." He wrapped his hand to the wrist in dirty chamois and took hers. Fuck, they were cold. "Argue. What's wrong? Where are you going? Pretty sure you're staying for the chop-chop. I mean, your kid needs you."

"They will want the rest," she mumbled.

Oh, for fuck's sake. Tony shook her a little. "You're such a fucking drama queen. Try this truth on for size: we're the fucking Avengers. Earth's mightiest heroes. We're not going to let Mundy's live half be anybody's dinner. They want to punish you? They can find some other way, or they can just fucking bite me. I have it on good authority that I'm very tasty. Well, I mean, my come, but close enough, right? Pineapple works great."

Loki half-laughed and shook her head. But she looked a little better. "Mortal fool. But you will, if I cannot be there?"

"Nope," Tony said, and talked over the betrayed hiss. "I'm not giving you a goddamn thing that'll let you dump him on us and walk off with a clean conscience. Either you stick around to supervise or you don't. Don't halfass it with 'you're better off with a nanny'. It's not the fucking same and it will never be the fucking same. Got that?"

She was staring at their hands but she wasn't making ew-mortals-are-gross faces, so Tony figured it was all right. "Is this experience, Stark?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it is. Look, that kid loves you. Like, really, really loves you. It's got to be scary as fuck, but don't you dare fucking run away from it now. You're going to be there to explain this shit, and you're going to make him small enough to move around without bumping into shit, and when we get him chopped up and out of there you're going to hold him and tell him everything will be okay, and you're going to do it even if I have to truss you up like a fucking turkey and airlift you in on a goddamn balloon. Got that?"

It was wobbly, decidedly so, but she managed to sneer at him. D for actual result, A+ for effort. "I will not be carted about by one of those contraptions."

"Well, yeah. How many people can I call Mundy? I mean, it's great, it's a great word. Very musical, perfect for calling out a window at three in the morning. Muuuundy, Mundy, ohhhh Mandy, I mean Mundy, Muuuuundy, ow, ow," and he yanked his hands out of the frostbite zone, sucking his fingertips. "Damnit, Argue."

"You have far too much heart," she told him, healing his fingers with a tiny spark of magic, and something in her tone, maybe a little exasperated, maybe a little resigned, was almost like she didn't mind.
Chapter 69

Chapter Notes

Descriptions of torture and manipulation and child abuse.

The quotes at the end are the very beginning of Terry Pratchett's Colour of Magic. It's actually not his best, that came later, but it can be a good intro.

Clint wasn't really surprised Loki requested him for the shower song-and-dance. It was just the sort of thing the kid would pull, and he finished up the meeting with Fury and Hill, settled in the chair with Pratchett and let Loki entertain himself in the tub for a while. A long while. A very long while.

An hour and a half of loud, obnoxious masturbation later Clint was deep into the middle of the book, the guards were past the skeptical eyebrow stage and in the trenches of bored blankness, and Loki was kicking water in Clint's face.

"Don't do that," shielding the book. There was probably enough come in the bathtub to float a sailor.

Loki sat up, flushed and scowling. Even if it was a bit pathetic that Loki wasn't comfortable with herself naked, Clint was still glad there weren't tits in the picture. "Entertain me."

"Not like that," Clint said, very dry.

"I would not take you if you were the last in the realms," Loki said prissily. "Tell me what you have there."

"A book. It's a story about a really incompetent wizard and a really annoying tourist. Remind you of anybody?" He showed him the cover.

Loki frowned at it. "The colour of magic is green. Obviously."

Clint shook his head and shifted position, scanning the room and checking everything was where it should be. "In the book it's octarine. Supposed to be very rare."

"Read to me," Loki demanded, folding his arms on the edge of the tub and oblivious to all the sloshing.

"Tell me something first." Clint jerked his head at the door. "Heard a bit of your talk with Stark. You put something in his head. What was it?"

He tilted his head, half-smile strange on his face. "I did not overwhelm his mind, nor did I damage it. It was a moment's moment. Nothing more than that."

"Since he can talk about it, that part was kind of obvious. It's also pretty obvious you're not answering the question."

"It was the image of Thor's death at the hands of Jormungandr," Loki said, spiteful like he wanted to snarl at somebody and Clint was the closest target. "Does that satisfy you?"
Clint smoothed pages, unfolding dog ears and that weird ruffle they all got at the top edges. He'd have to tape the spine sometime soon. "Not quite. Would they really eat him?"

Loki sighed, hands flexing in a way Clint remembered, and his bracelets clinked. "Asgard would not. Jotunheim would. Other worlds would, if they were in need of power. Power is conferred in bloodline and flesh and to eat of a sorcerer's brute is to gain power for one's children in turn. The stronger the sorcerer, the greater the child, the more the chance, and I am the greatest sorcerer of the realms. And if one were a would-be king of Jotunheim, the chance to birth oneself a sorcerer, or a score of such to your followers, would be highly prized. You saw how Jotun heal. There are few who can do such a thing, now."

Clint ran that through his head, then did it again. "That's a hell of a concession for Thor to make," he said finally.

It wasn't the same as giving them the heart of the realm or whatever it was, but it was giving them the option to patch themselves up and rebuild. Probably none of the magic kids would be as strong as Loki, but if there were enough of them the odds would be stacked in their favour. Probably a two-edged thing, losing the casket and losing their sorcerers. One could do without the other, but losing both was a bit of a death sentence according to Thrym's implications, and were a lot of them from someone so short on words.

Giving back their sorcerers ... it was a risky move. But Thrym had been so goddamn reasonable, and Thor had all the fervent aversion of the born-again when it came to the idea he might start another war. It could work. If there was time to make it work. If Jotunheim would get that time.

"Is it not a generous gift? Never enough to pay for my actions, but if they can find some satisfaction and allow Thor to treat with them, and if Odin can be satisfied with the Casket of Ancient Winters remaining in his treasure room, so much the better." His lips thinned. "I promised myself I would not use my children in such a way, and yet I do for the sake of expediency. I am a terribly unfit parent."

And that made it all click.

"Your mum's a crafty bitch."

Loki raised an eyebrow, somewhere between incredulous and delighted. "Pardon?"

"That's why the queen wants you back so bad, isn't it?" Clint closed the book and stared. They were both crafty little fucks, such crafty little fucking fucks, and he counted out the logic on his fingers as it all slotted in place like a slot machine. And it was a fucking slot machine, except that they were all trying to rig it so it'd go ding ding ding, three in a row, ten thousand cash payout and a complimentary prize. They were all trying to rig the same machine against each other, and it was just sheer fucking luck that they hadn't gamed each other out of existence.

It was creepily like the board games the gods played in Discworld, and he was just never, ever going to get that comparison out of his head. They were even ruining his books now, and Clint resented them for it.

"Do tell," Loki said, scrunching his nose. "I delight to know of your mortal insights."

"If she gets you out of the way in some prison somewhere she's free to move around, your kid gets sliced up for his own good with or without you, you'd feel grateful that she didn't chop up all of him but with him free she could lure him wherever she wanted if you didn't go along with her, Jotunheim cooperates and it doesn't matter because Asgard will rebuild the Bifrost before the giants get their army back up, the treaty makes Thor look good enough to have another coronation, and with you
locked up Asgard feels like they can be all benevolent at us, she can replace you with a turkey baster and a whole stack of grandkid steaks, and nobody --" Clint shook his head. "Damn. Nobody would've given a fuck."

Ding, ding, fucking ding. No cash and no prize, but it came goddamn close, didn't it? It all came so goddamn close. But for the grace of ... aw, hell. He was grateful to Stark. This was ridiculous.

"I feel like I'm on HBO," he complained to the world in general. One of the guards stifled a laugh.

"I did not expect you to treat me well," Loki said quietly, very calm in the face of Clint's annoyance, and right now Clint was really fucking annoyed. "That is your undoing."

"She didn't either, I bet. That's why the whole 'you're sick and delicate' stuff, isn't it? She assumed we'd done enough that we'd take her act as legit. But seriously, do you just all do this out of habit? Try to make everything win in a hundred different ways on a hundred different plots? What ever happened to one reason for one action?"

"That is for simpler minds," Loki said loftily. "The time passes long, and peace is ... dull. We are captive, and turn upon ourselves. For warriors there is nothing to be found in peace but a cage, Agent Barton. Did I not show you?"

"'Freedom is life's great lie','" Clint quoted back at him. "Thing is, she might have to be right soon enough." He smoothed his fingers along the string of his bow, testing tension. "The council want proof of your captivity, and Director Fury can't override them without losing his position, and I need to prove you aren't controlling me. How good are you at faking?"

Loki narrowed his eyes. "You speak as if you are certain."

Oh, he wanted it. He was practically drooling thinking about all the ways he could tear Loki up given necessity and half an hour and an hour would be even better. Knives and wires and listening to him scream and scream and scream. Crushing his teeth. Peeling his skin from his body and weaving it through the tendons of his fingers. Cutting out his fingernails and sewing them to his sinuses. A little lung adjustment and he'd strangle himself to death just breathing. He'd pour insects into his chest cavity and fill his ass with acid, the slow kind. And that was just the start.

He'd woken up hard thinking about it more than once in the last few weeks, and Clint wasn't going to be that guy for some skinny kid with a for-real god complex. Loki took his self-respect away from him once. He could deal with that. But just outright giving it up like it was a bit of linty gum in his pocket? Like hell. Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me, and Clint had a hell of a lot of shame stacked up for if he ever gave in.

"Just because you offer doesn't mean I'm taking you up on it," Clint said.

Loki rose from the bath, the guard's rifles lifting, and Clint had a lapful of naked, dripping, erect and diabolically self-destructive teenage god. Bleeding teenage god, picking bullets out of his side and thumbing them curiously like they were three-cornered jacks. "You speak as if you are certain."

There was just nowhere to put his hands, nowhere, and he put the book out of the danger zone and hooked his arms over the back of the chair and let them dangle. Loki's legs on his were about as friendly and yielding as a tow truck, and the weirdness of his skin being cold and the water and blood soaking him being so warm was way overshadowed by the fact that if Loki didn't want to move off him, he wasn't going to move.
"At ease, people. Yeah, I'm sure." Clint shifted his shoulders, planted his feet, and set to wait him out. It wasn't so much the intimacy of the thing. He'd been in worse positions with worse people. But while he'd never been a sex person and pretty much his whole life reflected that, having Loki on his lap with his gleaming teeth and the tiniest bit of baby fat where his shoulder met his neck and under his chin and the annoying prick's prick jabbing him in the hip was the pinnacle of unsexy.

He missed Phil so damn much. He liked his Boston marriage, damnit, and this kid -- this ridiculous, rude little upstart, was the one who'd taken that away from him.

Clint gave him a big toothy smile with every single bit of hate he'd saved up just for Loki, casual as you please. But also all the surety he had that Loki wouldn't do it even if Clint turned right round, stripped, and begged. "I wouldn't fuck you in a million years."

There'd been a telling moment back when Clint was deep under his control. A moment when he'd offered Loki rest and food and sex and Loki had eyed him up and down, taken the first two and left off the third with a contemptuous little eyeroll.

Knowing Loki had been right inside his head, thought about it, and decided against it so completely that Clint even offering was ridiculous had helped him piece himself together after he woke up. Clint wasn't a sex person, and Loki of all people had respected that. Hell, he'd respected it more than most of the douchebags Clint worked for in the past.

So he meant every fucking word, but it was impersonal as much as it was personal, a thank-you as much as an insult, and Loki deflated against his vest with a grin. "I presume you have experience in arranging this sort of pretense."

He didn't even have to think back, not with Loki's voice thready through the cheer like he was hanging to composure by his fingernails. "Yeah, I do. If you're not up for it I'll figure something else out, but you've already shown you can make doubles that look real on video. Give me one, act a little, it'll be over and done with."

"Yet you ask for the opportunity," a study in neutrals. Clint was sure of Loki -- but Loki wasn't sure of Clint.

How fucking funny was that?

"Well, I'm not really asking, but I've had a lot of chances to torture you," Clint said. "Don't see that I've used them." Time to negotiate a little. "Tell you what -- talk to me about somebody in Asgard that wasn't a dick to you when they could've been, and I'll read to you from the book. Story for story."

Loki frowned to himself, the weight of him easing to something less crushing. "Someone ..." He sucked his lip between his teeth, and Clint watched him think and waited. "You must be unclothed for my torture."

Loki frowned to himself, the weight of him easing to something less crushing. "Someone ..." He sucked his lip between his teeth, and Clint watched him think and waited. "You must be unclothed for my torture."

Clint could do that. Long shower after, but he could. It made sense that Loki wanted to be damn sure Clint wasn't getting off on it. But there was a larger picture here. "I won't do that. The council don't need an eyeful of my dick."

Loki glanced down, biting his lip. "You seem quite sure you're capable."

Dick jokes. Loki was making dick jokes. "Shut it. This is about you as much as it is about me. Take it or leave it."

"I will allow you a double," Loki said, elbows braced on Clint's shoulders, and this close his eyes
were rimmed blue. "An hour, and your worst. No more. You will tell me what you need of me beforehand." He nodded to the book. "Half today. The rest afterwards."

He paused. "You know what acting means, right?"

Loki flashed a grin. "Even I know there are times when it is best not to lie. Would it not satisfy you?"

"No," Clint said. There would never be enough satisfaction, no matter what he did. He could have Loki to himself without oversight for decades, and it wouldn't be enough.

"No?" Loki echoed, and he sighed, setting his chin on his palm. "No, there is not."

The kid looked like he was going to cry, and Clint's life was weird enough already without halfassedly comforting Phil's murderer. "Can you even act?"

"Yes," Loki muttered. "You will pretend to do your worst and I shall pretend it matters in the slightest."

"In that case, deal." Clint settled, shifting as best as he could to redistribute Loki's weight a little. It didn't matter at this point whether Loki believed Clint would pretend or not -- the video would need a little editing anyway. "Your story first."

Loki had a hand over his eyes. "You are so convinced there is one to tell."

"You'd be dead otherwise," Clint said. "I have a theory. Care to hear it?"

That made him laugh for some reason, the wild little laugh he'd heard off his own brother before Clint shot him between the eyes, and Loki was a kid, and a god, and Clint had just agreed to torture him for the cameras to save his and Fury's jobs, and nothing about them or the world was different. He'd always been capable of this, of both these things: Loki's pain, and Loki's need.

"You and the queen, and Odin even, you're all looking for satisfaction. And you're looking in all the wrong places. You know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

He'd hollowed out so much of Clint to pour himself inside. So much, and he'd left a little behind. With the hate he'd left something like camaraderie. The kind he had with nobody except Nat. Probably accidental, but Clint remembered that feeling, knew the warmth of it in his bones.

Clint knew from the way Loki snarled at him that he remembered too.

Not so much the snarl itself. But the way he leaned close, and shifted, and settled with his legs draped over him, like he'd forgotten he was hurting Clint. He probably had.

But that smoothness of movement told him two other things. One, Loki definitely had dance training, and two, he'd done this before. Not deliberately, the way Nat was deliberate, but the way he sat in increments so he didn't skid off Clint's lap and hooked his arm easily around his neck was too familiar to be anything but habit. Loki sat on someone's lap, once upon a time. A lot. And he'd done it naked or slippery, a lot.

"It is said a mother's fulfilment is in the care of her husband and children." Loki tipped a very angled smile Clint's way. "The All-Mother takes it from the well-being of her people. A pity that I and Odin refuse to be cared for. A pity that Odin stays the hands of his warriors."

So not his mother, then. Not someone that wasn't allowed to do what they were meant to do. They'd've been too angry to deal with Loki gently enough that he sat like it was something he was
fond of, and that in itself ruled out all of his family. "You sat with someone like this before. Who was it?"

"It relates to my tale," Loki said, propping his heels on the rung of the chair, and Clint hissed and shoved until Loki rolled his eyes and ran the water again, perching on the edge of the tub while Clint rubbed his numb thighs. Fuck, the kid had a bony arse. Double-fuck, the kid could be heavy when he wanted to be, and his toes stung with pins and needles. "The stablemaster was not pleased by the circumstances of Sleipnir's conception, and defied Odin's edict to find me. He was concerned for the stallion." Loki shrugged. "But it seemed that the stallion's bloodline was highly prized, regardless of who carried his progeny." He sank into the water, pulling up his knees, and Clint stretched his arms and listened. "My pregnancy continued as pregnancies do, but his birth was difficult. I had not thought to allow for eight legs, and if not for the master's assistance we would have died. I was grateful. He wanted more heirs, but the stallion left with his master, so he wished to breed me with Sleipnir."

One of the guards made a shocked little noise.

Loki didn't bother to glance up. "Oh, yes. It is not so uncommon. A sorcerer and a sorcerer's child? Such talented parentage. However, as I was not an animal at the time, I refused. I didn't see the point at all, in fact, and I would have been quite well off never seeing my son again, but Odin forbade it and I disliked his commands, and -- I hurt. The master explained Sleipnir needed to be fed with milk, my milk, and we came to a compromise. I had the opportunity to visit with Sleipnir, this creature I birthed, and he had the opportunity to touch me while I did so."

Jesus.

And that was what he called kindness.

"Naked?" Clint asked, just to confirm.

"Of course," Loki said, contorting to scratch his lower back and frowning at Clint like he was the strange one. "He said Sleipnir's needs were unique, but he continued to care for him at great personal cost though he gained nothing from the arrangement. I thought it quite well-done."

He sounded so proud of himself, and Clint didn't even bother phrasing the next one. Rising gorge and bile did that to a guy. "And did he have sex with you?"

Loki sneered at him in disbelief. "He was the stablemaster. Ugly and impotent. I was a prince of Asgard," like it was self-explanatory, and for someone as vain and proud as Loki, it probably was.

"That's not a horror story?" one of the guards said. Same guard that'd gasped earlier, actually. One of Clint's least favourite favourites. Guy had a decent streak too broad for SHIELD, but Clint relied on him to keep the others from shooting Loki when the kid ran their tempers ragged. "That's the kind story? You don't have any others?"

He paused in flossing his teeth with his hair and tipped his head back, eyebrow raised. "You do know you are to be mute," he said, almost kindly, and squinted at Clint. "The decoration is speaking. Why is it speaking?"

He spread his hands. "Generally people have voices," he remarked. "And then they use them. It's amazing how that happens."

Loki glared like Clint was personally offending him and leveled that same cut-glass green at the sargeant, who actually looked genuinely concerned. Clint owed him so many slabs of beer for
putting up with this shit. For caring. For knowing he was walking into the jaws of someone who put Clint through the wringer and doing it anyway. For putting off the others with suggestions to go talk a walk and to change out and switch up shifts so Loki wouldn't ever, ever be trapped in a room with someone boiling mad at him.

Captain America wasn't the only Steve in the world, and Clint didn't deserve to know either of them. SHIELD was wall to wall with heroes. Maybe he could get Nat to expense the beer to the Avengers food account.

"You know they're volunteers, right?" Loki blinked back at Clint.

"What?"

He gestured at them, poised around the room, steady hands on steadier rifles, alert and politely focused in the middle distance except for the sergeant. "They're not here because they have to be. I put a call out for guards and they volunteered."

Loki rolled his eyes. "Ignorance. They could not withstand any of the forces seeking my death. Nor could they strike me as they doubtlessly wish."

"We're here anyway," the sergeant said. "You don't talk to us, we don't talk to you, but we listen. We've got ears. I've been on this mission this whole time, and I've heard a hell of a lot. It's not right what's happened to you. It's not right. Your parents come through that door, they grab you, they'll do it over my dead body. My youngest takes better care of her gerbil and she's four."

Clint savoured the sweet, sweet sight of Loki soaking wet and wide-eyed as a startled cat and absolutely speechless.

Didn't Stark own a beer factory or something? He definitely had to look into that.

"My turn for storytime. You read this, Sarge?"

He was straightening back into professional stance. "Nah. It's my kids that like the magic stuff. I read them Harry Potter about ten million times but I've never heard of that guy."

"Yeah, Pratchett's a bit different." He folded the book open and cleared his throat, waited a bit for Loki's wobbly chin to stabilise, and started reading. "In a distant and secondhand set of dimensions, in an astral plane that was never meant to fly--"

"Of course not," Loki snorted.

Clint stared until he shut up. "This was the deal. I'm delivering. Shut the fuck up and let me read. Anyway. 'In an astral plane that was never meant to fly, the curling star-mists waver and part...""
Chapter 70

Chapter Notes

I think the guards are the unsung heroes of this 'verse. Still sick, sorry I missed yesterday.

Child abuse, past torture, past and current racism, gender essentialism, excusing likely douchebaggery, an ableist slur. Please note the work tags.

The last thing he expected to see on arriving for his shift was Loki cradling a child and performing a sleeping baby version of the lindy hop with no mother in sight.

"Hey, Cap."

Steve hoisted his shield, wary of Loki's apparent unconcern as he went to stand beside Barton, unsure if to be more or less worried by how he was behaving as though absolutely nothing was wrong with this situation. "Agent, where's his guardian?"

"One of the nurses dropped her off, some cases came in and apparently those two get on like a house on fire. Nat can write it off as a trust exercise if it'd make you feel better, but I wouldn't recommend it. She's pissed off at me already. Giving her more paperwork ..." He waved his hand at his neck.

"Ah." Steve still wasn't sure what to make of it, but Loki was humming and rocking her, moving in vague soothe-the-cranky-baby circles. There was a tiny frown between his eyebrows, exactly mirroring the child's, and contentment in the lines around his mouth, and he never looked away from her.

It was like nothing else existed in his world.

"She's mine," one of the guards said, a round woman with a severe braid. "But I'm working right now. He's not. Asked to hold her. Sir."

"Nothing's gonna get past him to hurt that kid. Nothing and nobody, not even Loki's cats," Barton said, and gestured him into a chair. "Relax a bit."

But even that was tempered with something the opposite of affection. Knowledge without respect, maybe, but that wasn't quite right. "You're not very ..." He wasn't sure of the word. He wasn't sure there was a word for the mix of understanding and ruthlessness. "You're very efficient with him."

Barton raised his eyebrows. "Just doing my job. And being bored out of my skull after those two chatted it up. I've heard way too much about vags. And childbirth. And what happens to vags after childbirth. It's fascinating stuff, Cap. Riveting."

"Is that it all it is?" Steve hadn't expected to be quite so disappointed. Perhaps it was too much to ask him to care, but he'd expected it. He'd expected better than enough sarcasm to butter a loaf.

"Cap, it's all I've got right now." He drummed his fingers on the backrest. "You should be glad I've still got it, 'cause if I weren't with SHIELD, code of conduct and all, that kid's head would've been splattered all over Stark Tower a month ago and I can't say I'd regret it. Not yours, Hanna Lin."
Steve glanced between the two of them: Loki in his private maternal world, and Barton casually watching him with enough curling, smirking hate to remind him, painfully, of Schmidt. Something in the arrogance of it, the preference for fast cars and faster weapons and occult myths as though taking hold of the beginning was the same as being quickest on the draw. "He knows that. Doesn't he? I don't see how he could not, when you're so open about it."

"Oh, yeah. Me and him, we like it that way. No bullshit." Barton shook his head at Steve's poorly-hidden bewilderment. "Oh. Riiiiight. Okay. You never saw what happened after you stormed the labs, did you?"

"Not usually," Steve said, settling against the railing. He knew it could hold his weight, but he always had to test it first; he'd broken enough chairs and balconies by accident after the serum that he never quite sat down on the first go anymore. "We set up, went in, captured everyone, mapped the location and defused what traps we could, handed everything over to the authorities, went for the next one. I always wanted to follow up with some of them, but I never did. There wasn't enough time. But I remember them. They stuck with me."

"Yeah, well." Steve fended off defensiveness and focused on Loki instead, trying to keep his hackles down.

Loki was singing something else now, something not quite with words, and he trailed off into meaningless sounds, keeping the tune, until he came back into something he could sing again. Steve wondered how the child wasn't screaming, how there wasn't the slightest trace of umber to her skin the way there would be if she was sick. It could be an illusion, of course. But Loki was holding her with such care. Perhaps he really wasn't hurting her.

"Sometimes the people who hate you flat out are a relief. It's like ... I don't know, how you hate the fourth estate. All the lies about how well the war was going and everybody was happy and 'our boys over there', that kind of thing, and in the meantime you put out buckets for prisoners dripping off the ceiling and giving you enough food meant pinching everyone else's rations because you were Captain America and you hated it and you hated them for lying about being forced to do it. I've seen you eat, Cap. Don't tell me they didn't."

Before the Commandos there'd been the USO chorus girls. They'd been so terribly kind about the whole thing that he hadn't noticed until rescuing Bucky just how much he'd become accustomed to eating, just how little they had left over once he was just this side of not-quite-hungry anymore. He hated that he still didn't know why they tried, if they'd been ordered to or if they just did because he was Captain America and he somehow mattered more than they did. "The troupe were always on diets."

"Rations are diets, dude."

Steve couldn't help laughing at himself. "That's true. I got around it, though. Howard funded the SSR, like Tony funds the Avengers now, and he always was generous. Extravagant. The ladies were so kind I didn't like refusing, but they accepted that Howard shared some of his stores with me and that made it fairer."

Barton was sizing him up, relaxed in a predatory way that Steve was still trying not to react to with reflexes like punching him or going toe to toe or something else similarly melodramatic. It wasn't that Steve was prey. It was just that everything was a potential target, and Steve understood enough of that not to fidget too much when it was aimed at him.

"They did the same for Thor." Steve tried not to flinch at the comparison. "He came by, Loki was snoozing, we talked a little. Nothing much happened -- you'd know if it did, Cap, relax. But
apparently there was some kind of famine during a campaign and the people in his platoon gave him half their rations on top of his because he was pretty much the entire campaign. Killing them was his job and their job was to follow after him and make sure anybody still alive got a quick execution."

Barton's point was easy to glean. "I wasn't quite that good at being a figurehead."

"Yeah, no. I mean, you still are. Stark likes to pretend he's the brains of the outfit, but seriously, come on. He's a flea on crack. You're the one who tells us which way's up. So don't feel too bad about what they did. It's pretty logical to think you matter more."

It was terrible how he actually felt better for the reassurance even though it was delivered with barely a thimble's worth of sympathy and ounces of wrong, and sorrow gripped his throat for a moment. "When I was in the orphanage I used to imagine reviving my father to shout at him." He fiddled with the strap of his shield. "Both of my parents. I had so many questions. I have so many questions for all of them. Everyone I knew. But it's a luxury they're dead, really. Isn't it?"

They were all dead. All dead. All the lives he'd missed, and all he had of them was the memories of them at their saddest and angriest. SHIELD had pictures of the survivors in their later years, and the smiles on some of them. The smiles. He hadn't known they could look like that. Steve still couldn't do it himself.

"It's easier. They don't talk back. No news is good news." He didn't like how uncertain he sounded. "Isn't it?"

"Sometimes." Steve heard him shift. "It's not like I enjoy hanging out with, you know, the guy that ripped me out of my head for funsies, but I'm not making myself miserable about it because I know the only thing comes out of his mouth is shit. If I ask him anything, I'll get shit back. That's not the kind of thing you get from dead people."

"Not everything is shit," Steve felt compelled to say. "He didn't have to draw for me, but he did. He didn't have to heal Agent Romanova, or Tony, or anyone, but he did. He didn't have to step between me and his mother, but he did. I told him I don't think 'liesmith' is the right word for what he does. I still don't think so."

Barton snorted. "Notice how none of that is stuff he said? Look, Stark senior never, ever stopped looking for you. Ever. There's about a thousand memos of people asking him to do something more useful with the resources and him just not giving a flying fuck. That's a nice thing to do for you. Very devoted, even if he got sidetracked by the Tesseract. Not so nice for Stark junior, but I think he's getting over it now. You do that to people, you know. You make them want to be better than they are."

"Doesn't seem to work on you." Steve folded his arms under his knees, a habit he'd broken a long time ago but had come back with distressing force recently. Sitting on his hands wouldn't help anything, really, but it helped him to think he couldn't bear to draw because it was impossible at that moment, not because he was a coward.

"Oh, Cap. It does. This is me better. You can tell by how I'm not going in there and playing keepaway with the baby and my bow just to piss him off. I have so much fucking material, man." He made a peculiar little noise. "Being the better person blows monkey ass."

"Also if you did that, I'd fill you full of holes and swear before God and country you were kidnapping my baby."

"I know better, trust me," Clint said to her.
"Yeah," Steve said, wiggling his fingers, and thought of bullies and diners and disappointment. Always the disappointment. He really thought better of Barton, and to hear him talk it was obvious that he'd thought about it. That he'd fantasised, probably was fantasising right now. "I don't think you would. Even without me to blame for stopping you. You'd blame someone else, but you still wouldn't hurt that child."

"Which one?"

Steve met his eyes. He'd trusted Romanova's trust in Barton to pilot him, back him up, and direct the rest of them on containing the Chitauri from making more of a mess than they could contain. He would trust him the same now. Even knowing what Barton just told him. "Either of them."

Barton groaned. "Aw hell, Cap, you've got the sad face on and now I'm gonna feel all guilty."

"But you won't stop thinking about it." It wasn't quite a guess. Really, he'd had too much practice dealing with people who were -- not quite right. Not bad people. Sometimes malicious, sometimes with blinders the size of France to the idea of other people feeling and thinking the way they did. Sometimes they didn't know they felt much, either, and thought it was the way everyone was.

"Nope. You're not that good, Cap. Nobody is."

"Yeah. I didn't think so."

Then there were the others on the other side of things, who knew too much, who knew every inch of their own evil and cradled it close, wound themselves around it good and tight until it was the only thing propping them up against everything they'd faced and still had to face, and Steve still trusted them at his back, vindictive and spiteful and cruel as they sometimes were.

Because he had to. Because sometimes he envied how they could deflect anything to begin with, sometimes he tucked away the things they said to recite in his mind at the memories of people who'd hurt him, and knowing that about himself made it easier to believe they listened when he told them not to turn the viciousness on each other. Humour was fine. But to hurt and only hurt -- he'd forbidden that from the start.

Steve was damn sure he wouldn't have liked Barton at all without the Initiative making the decision for him.

He was fairly sure now that he did like Loki, but if the decision had been made for him he wouldn't have at all.

Sometimes he found himself to be a contrary little shit. Stubborn as a mule, Bucky had said, and twice as stupid. Dum-Dum called him Captain Donkey for months, and it'd been surreal and hilarious and so, so reassuring to hear him bellowing for Steve while they were hip-deep in wrestling mud and blood and booze.

One time he'd done it while he was with a man, and Steve had burst in to see Dum-Dum caterwauling with their heads down around each other's privates and demanding that Steve shift the man's leg and hand him the fishskin because he didn't have leverage to do it himself, and the man had put down his rifle and introduced himself between fits of shaking laughter while Steve tried to apologise for Dum-Dum being dum-dum and scaring the crap out of both of them, and that ended up in discussing the Captain America venereal disease posters plastered everywhere while Dum-Dum pulled the blankets over his head and kicked Steve until he left. Wherever Private Subrata ended up, he had a hell of a story.
"What're you smiling about, Cap?"

"Ah, a story from the Commando days." He tried to tell it, tried to so much as breathe a word of it, but couldn't; the urge to protect them all was still as fierce as it ever was. It was one thing to tell Loki and Tony. It was another to tell someone who reported to Fury.

Barton was giving him that prickly, predatory stare again. "We've heard a little about them," he said. "They were pretty wild, even for the time."

"It was stressful," Steve said, pulling his hands free. "We were all under a good deal of pressure to find HYDRA, and they coped admirably. So they blew off a little steam. We all did, in the war."

"Not judging, Cap, put the attitude down." He shook his head. "I get that you don't trust me much, but ... hell, SHIELD isn't that uptight. I'm not that uptight. I recruited Nat, okay? SHIELD recruited me. I know from taking good people where you find them."

He did have a point, but ... "It's not the same, Agent. I fought for them. We protected each other. It was the difference between being the Commandos and being just any old unit. I respect the director, and I respect you, but I can't betray them like that. We got up to a few things. Of course we did. They were still the best people I've ever known. We came back for each other. We always did."

"They can't come back for you, Cap." It wasn't gentle and it helped, but in a way the flat truth of it cut deeper. There was no way for it not to hurt.

"Yes." Steve folded his hands together against the ache. "You're wrong about Howard. He was part of the Strategic Reserve and I don't deny he had his faults, but he was part of us too. The first time we tried the paint and hat trick on him he dumped water on me and told me not to be ridiculous."

"Yeah, I wondered how you handled the race thing. There's a lot of outraged editorials on the microfiche. Blah blah segregation blah blah illegal how can the hero of our country betray us like this blah blah." Barton stretched in his chair and Steve checked on Loki, who was no doubt listening, but all he was doing was feeding the baby, so that was all right.

"Well, that's --" Wait. "Loki?"

Steve's neck strained from the doubletake and triplletake and yes, he'd seen correctly the first time. Loki had his armour open to the waist, straps hanging, and he was wearing his face and body but his chest was swollen with milk, and the baby was latched with a tiny fist pressed against Loki's heart. Loki was pale and glaring and braced like they were going to punch him.

"Well, that's not something you see every day," so studiedly nonchalant that Steve struggled not to laugh. It hurt that Loki could smile so generously the way Steve couldn't, when it was Loki who had every right not to and Steve had no right not to be able to. "Kid's gonna get mastitis."

"I will not," Loki said, voice ragged, and he cleared his throat with an awkward shift of his hands, the pleasure on his face swiftly concealed by contempt. Steve wondered why he'd been content to just listen to them talk. "I am not so foolish as that."

"I have a pumper," Hanna Lin said. "But that's beside the point. I don't think he'd feed my kid something that'd hurt it."

"Yeah. Kind of cool he can do that, isn't it?" Barton said, chin tipped Steve's way but his eyes still on Loki, who was cradling the baby very close, still sucking and ignoring all of them in favour of food, and braced like he thought they were going to hit him.
"Yeah." Steve offered Loki a smile, trying not to spook him more than he already was. The way he balanced in his boots looked an awful lot like fear. "It's neat."

"You probably have super god milk or something," Barton said, very speculative. "Baby's gonna be a genius. Hey, do you taste different to us? You're raised on mead and honey or something, right?"

Steve sputtered, scandalised. "Agent Barton!"

"Mortals," Loki said with no heat whatsoever. "That is Asgard. I was raised on frozen blood and milk." He rubbed the opposite nipple and held out a finger, droplets oozing. "You will lose your opportunity, Agent Barton."

"How can you --"

"Trust me, Cap," Barton said, and he was going into the cell and touching a finger to Loki's and licking it thoughtfully, and Steve despaired of ever, ever liking him. "Hey, that's actually pretty good. Keep nomming, baby. Nom nom. You've got great eats."

Loki's face froze somewhere between hate and uncertainty, and he had both arms back around the baby, hunched protectively. "You will not take her," he snarled, but the frightened quiver of his mouth made it a question.

"Nope. Not taking. I'm not her mum, I just said I wouldn't, didn't I? Watch me not do it." Barton raised his hands and backed out of the cell slow step by step, letting the door shut in front of him. "See? I told Cap you wouldn't hurt her."

"I could," Loki murmured, brushing the top of her head.

"Dude, you're feeding her. That's like the opposite of hurt."

Something in his stance sagged relief and disbelief, and Steve saw his fear only in its leaving and grappled with understanding. Of course Loki hadn't ever had anyone approve of his breastfeeding before. Of course Loki hadn't ever had his milk treated like it could be good for a child. Of course no-one gave Loki the chance to prove he could feed a baby without hurting it just by being who he was.

And Barton refuted every single one in the space of three minutes. Was it familiarity that bred his contempt?

But Barton having to at all gave Thor's order to murder Angrboda and retrieve Loki new, troubling dimensions. If Thor and his friends thought Frost Giants were poison, and thought Angrboda was feeding them, then in a strange way they were trying to protect the children. But they wouldn't have known about Loki, only Angrboda. They'd killed the wrong giant, and it was both funny and sad.

They'd been together for quite a while, to hear Loki talk -- long enough to establish a relationship Steve still didn't know how to describe, long enough to have children, long enough for Loki to learn from her and still love her enough to be able to draw every whorl on her face when Steve asked, and correct Steve on every placement of Jormungandr's scales. Why hadn't they come earlier if they cared so much?

Loki soothed the baby as she burped and cried and settled against his shoulder, reaching up to grab his nose with a happy gurgle. He laughed, and his smile was breathtakingly painful to watch.

Steve severely doubted he'd put the baby down for anybody, invading army or angry parent or both. Thor could walk in. Odin and Frigga could pop in and out as they pleased and chance upon him at
any moment. He had to know that, and he still he let SHIELD pretend he was their prisoner and they pretended he wasn't capable of overpowering them enough to make a damn good try at running for it. So who was he hiding from by being here at all?

Loki gave away secret after secret with barely a murmur to Tony when Tony whined and bribed and complained that he needed the help to make the portal and shield better, and Tony irritated Loki like nobody else. Steve just wasn't convinced it was because of Thanos. Loki talked of Thanos like he was Asgard's Hulk -- inevitable and frightening and not worth the bother of resisting.

It couldn't be the queen -- she simply wasn't powerful enough, and he was too contemptuous of Odin. Thor wasn't even a consideration. So who was enough of a known threat, powerful enough to threaten him, and weak enough that there was a point to Loki staying here and telling Tony enough of his trade that even Tony was getting uncomfortable with the amount of information?

Steve watched him do up his clothes, shifting the baby from hand to hand as she fussed, and tried to decipher what was missing from the picture.

"Deep thoughts there, Cap," and Steve watched Loki's eyes flick over them both, listening.

"Who tried to kill you?" Loki blanched and Steve cursed. There wasn't a good way to phrase it, but he could have tried to. "I mean -- I think someone tried."

Loki glared. "Everyone tries."

"Don't be melodramatic," Barton said, scratching his ankle. "Answer Cap properly and maybe he'll tell us about the eight million miles of trainwreck between 'your breastfeeding is cool' and 'somebody tried to kill you'."

"Of course someone tried," Loki said. "Mine was an unpopular reign."

"Yeah, I think Cap means something a bit more specific," studying Loki now.

"You shall have to wonder." Something in Loki's face was very brittle. "Cease your inquiry."

Steve exchanged glances with Barton. "All right," Steve said, and closed his mouth. He'd probably figured out that the person in question didn't like him a long time ago, and attempted murder couldn't have been pleasant. He just hoped it wasn't someone else from Asgard. There was obviously more to the place than royalty and scheming, from Thor's references to servants and harvests and mead, but it was hard to remember when their failures were staring back at him.

"Yeah, back to what we were saying earlier," and Barton shifted to face him, Loki's shoulders dropping as he did. "How did you manage the race thing? Pretty sure half the Commandos were flat-out illegal."

"It was harder at first," Steve said, collecting his thoughts and dragging them away from the problem of Loki.

The answers to 'why would he want Tony in charge' and 'who was out to get him' were probably connected, and as long as Loki refused to talk Steve would be missing the last piece. He could accept that. He had to.

"Some of them were with the 107th for a while, but the officers covering for them were mostly dead. So I had to prove myself and hope we did well enough to let the general pretend he couldn't see anything wrong. You know about the paint and calamine. Or we covered everyone in mud and claimed we'd just got back from a mission and hadn't had time to clean up. Convenient absences.
Furloughs. Illnesses. Fudging the papers. There was a diplomat who gave them dual citizenship so we could claim they were on loan from Norway. That sort of thing."

"Sounds like a lot of work."

"Worth doing." Steve considered his hands. "They were amazing. We had some turnover, it was the nature of what we did, and we were handed other people's trash. So we set up reading circles and passed books around and bribed more diplomats and got banned from half the hostels in Italy. The other half wouldn't serve them, and we -- well, we all slept outside. By the end I had more dual citizens than not and it wasn't all peaches and roses, I got a lot of things wrong, but it was ... it worked. We did it. We stopped HYDRA."

"You used similar reasoning to recruit for my cause," Loki said, curled on the mattress and the baby asleep on him, looking half-gone himself, the armour a heap of straps and fixings on the floor.

"Yeah, SHIELD hasn't exactly played nice in the past, especially with foreign interests. Even though we're 'international', it's not like I hear that many languages at work, you know?" Barton shrugged. "A lot of people jumped at the chance to get their own back. It made the overseas operations a cinch. We were lucky the Tesseract just needed one spear to close all the portals or we'd have been up shit creek. If you're gonna snooze, give Cap the kid. I don't want you rolling on her."

Loki scoffed, but he was yawning, and they managed to compromise with Steve kneeling next to him, Loki's shins hard against Steve's hip and the baby tucked in the hollow of his chest so Steve could take her after Loki fell asleep.

It took a long time -- he kept opening his eyes to look at her -- but he eventually managed to ease her out of Loki's grip without startling him awake and pull the blanket up over him.

Barton had long since gone to check on Romanova, and Steve was alone with Loki snoring next to him, very young with the covers tucked in around his neck, and the little girl kicking every so often in her sleep.

He heard footsteps, and turned to see a woman in a nurse's uniform cross the gangway, laden with bags. "Hi," she whispered, and kissed the guard -- her lover? -- on the lips. "I'm picking her up for the night. Mum's down from Toronto."

Hanna Lin smiled back at her. "Goodnight, darling."

Steve verified that she was who she said she was and had her recite the phone number and the full name of the baby's mother, father and grandmother and date of birth and the emergency contact listing before Steve was willing to open the door and hand her over. He apologised throughout, but they only sighed and rolled their eyes and gave him looks of irritated tolerance.

"This place, so paranoid," she said with a patience that indicated she'd had to do it before. "Shhh, shh, baby, shh, oh, you look so much better now. We're taking you home now. Thanks for looking after her."

"I want to thank him for taking care of her, but I don't want to wake him -- can you do that when he's up?" Hanna Lin angled her rifle and shrugged. "Not something to do at work."

Loki was probably already awake, but Steve wasn't about to say that. "Of course. She was sick?"

"Oh, absolutely," the nurse said. "She was in big trouble, weren't you, sweetie? Running a hell of a fever and we couldn't get it down. We're lucky the supervisor thought of asking him, or we'd have had tiny baby coffins on our hands. They're a bit depressing, you know? Have a good night."
"Good night," he said, blinking disbelief at Hanna Lin who looked back, square and silent and confident like she'd been all night even though -- even though --

"Thanks again!" her lover called from the gangway.

Steve waited until the sound of her faded away before he turned back to Loki, unsurprised that his eyes were open. "Hey. She said --"

"I heard." He inclined his head. "You promised to finish the drawing of Jormungandr."

Steve blinked again. So he had. "Ah, sure." He took the sketchbook and pencils and sat on the floor again, careful not to react when Loki put his head against his leg. He wasn't sure what to think, really.

Loki hummed to himself for a while and chose the exact moment Steve got into a good rhythm to start talking. "My father tried to conceal me. He gave me this skin and this form and told me it was mine, and any distance was my imagination. How is that different from your paint?"

"Well." He took up another pencil, mindful of Loki glaring balefully. "They knew from the start, I think. I don't think they could really ... not know. We don't have magic to put on skins like you do."

"And yet here you are."

"Here I am," Steve agreed. "Does it bother you?"

"I am curious as to its origin," Loki said after a moment. "It is unusual. More unusual still that your beast replicated it so accurately."

He shook his head. "It failed."

"No," Loki said. "He became as he believed of himself. You had a wish, and it was true. He had a belief, and so it was."

Steve choked. "He hates himself that much?"

"Oh, yes." Loki chuckled. "What you see of the beast is what he makes of the man. It is his reflection."

"I ... I almost think you mean literally."

"Yes."

He tried to comprehend being that twisted on himself. Not that he was unfamiliar with it, but usually it had marks of its origin. An accident, a scar, a period of captivity, something visible to say that something wasn't quite right. To give it boundaries; a before, and an after. Steve himself had a Before Ice and After Ice to cling to, and a Before Serum and After Serum, too, if he was desperate. To have so little before that it was his own face ... "That's terrible."

"Tch. Your merry band of brothers has changed that somewhat."

"That's good to hear, but I hate to think of him feeling like a monster at all. He's not."

Loki shifted against him. "And if it comes to pass that the beast is his true self?"

Steve shook his head. He wasn't under any illusions that this conversation was really about Banner. "That's not possible. If it was, he wouldn't care so much about Hulk's damage."
"You wouldn't hand him a child."

"I would hand Doctor Banner a child," Steve corrected. "Hulk doesn't have the mobility. It's practical."

There was a soft noise from the blankets, tiny and awful. "I miss them. I wasn't a bad mother. I wasn't. I tried. I knew nothing but she taught me and I tried. They did love me."

It was the sort of thing that never, ever should have been a question, and Steve showed him his hand, waited for the nod, and half-turned to stroke his hair. Clean today; that was good. "Of course they did. You were their mother. Don't you remember how happy Jormungandr was? They do love you."

"But why? They should hate me. I am a monster, I am terrible, I let them be taken -- I tried, but I couldn't -- I couldn't find them."

"Shh. Shh." Steve thought of his father, and his mother, and the nuns at the orphanage, and Bucky's face, resolute and falling, and bent to put his lips to Loki's hair, the way Loki did over and over to comfort the child. "That's what children do. You did your best, Loki. Good enough for Asgard or not, you did your best. That doesn't make you a monster or a bad mother, it just means that they asked for more than you could give. You were young, Loki."

Too young. Too, too goddamned young.

"Not so much older than her, really. Would you ask her to do more than she was capable of and blame her when she couldn't outwit gods four times her age?"

"Of course not," very quiet and scratchy. "It would be unfair."

"See? You're too hard on yourself. If it would be unfair to her, it was unfair to you."

"No. She is mortal, not monstrous."

Steve sighed. "Well, think about it. Have a look at this?"

Critiquing Steve's artistic ability cheered Loki up immensely, as predicted, and he fell asleep on Steve's knee, still muttering over the misplaced moniker of Rembrandt and how unworthy he was to be so much as considered part of that circle, he couldn't even get his son's eyes right, what sort of artist did he think he was, mortal fool.

Steve studied him, his mouth squished by blankets, eyebrows drawn down and his nose pushed at an angle by the seam of Steve's trousers, hair skirled into odd twists on his scalp, and opened to a new page to draw him as he was. Godly, of course. Powerful. Unstable, with streaks of cruelty wide as the day was long. But mostly Steve thought of how a god had nursed a sick baby to health without prompting or protest. He'd been prepared to defend her against them if they tried to make him stop. A sick, fragile, mortal infant.

Banner wasn't the only one with a distorted reflection. If Steve could use his inferior mortal scribbles to show Loki even a little of that -- well, it was worth doing.

"Fool," Loki mumbled, shifting with an inelegant snore.

"Yes, I am."
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