Glorious Purpose

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Summary

Loki was raised with the knowledge that he was burdened with a glorious purpose for Asgard. When he learns what that purpose is, however, he refuses to accept it. For centuries he fights the destiny chosen for him, but Thor is always quick to remind him of his place.

When the Jotun Prince seeks asylum on Midgard, Tony Stark will learn how fiercely Asgard guards its treasures.

Notes

This was an AU I had in mind for a while. I actually suggested it on the kinkmeme, but no one went for it, so I thought I'd try myself. Basically it is an AU where Odin took Loki after the war, but instead of raising him as a son, he is raised as Thor's betrothed. Through their marriage, Asgard will have control of both realms. He's trained to be the perfect queen and in all of the arts appropriate for a woman. He's not allowed in the company of any men other than those approved by Odin, and he's never allowed to leave Asgard. Pssh... Like that will stop the god of mischief.
He was Loki, and he was burdened with glorious purpose…

At least, that’s what the Allfather had been telling him since he had the ability to comprehend the words of his Aesir captors. In the beginning, Loki never questioned what that purpose may have been, he never felt the need to. After all, why raise any unnecessary questions when there was no need? That was what Frigga had been teaching him for all of those years, and for centuries, Loki had taken her words to heart. There was no need to raise any fuss when all of his needs were met, he was tutored privately in the histories of the realms by the scholars of Asgard, and he was treated amicably by the servants of the palace.

There were a lot of things that Loki never questioned in those first few centuries. He didn’t wonder why he spent the majority of his days confined to his own private wing in the palace; not when he had his own chest of toys to play with, his own books to read, and Hulda, his nurse and one constant companion. He never thought to ask why he was only allowed access to Idunn’s gardens at night if he was covered in a cloak that hid his face or why he was flanked on all sides by members of the Einherjar. He never thought to ask why he never saw any of the other children of Asgard. He never wondered why he was always so alone.

He could sometimes hear the laughter of children from the window of his chambers, but he never saw their faces. He’d tried, once, to peer out of his window in order to see the other children, to confirm that he wasn’t alone. As he opened the window, though, Hulda had screamed and pulled him away, telling him that he must never do such a thing again. Loki never questioned Hulda, for she was the closest thing that he had known to a mother. He had trusted that she was only looking out for him.

Though most of his childhood was lonely, he can’t claim that it was completely terrible. When he wasn’t playing with Hulda, he was tutored privately by Mimir and Kvasir, two members of the Aesir council who taught him knowledge of the runes and the wisdom of the nine realms. He was visited weekly by the queen herself, lovely Frigga. She would often dine with him and show him the proper courtesies that were expected of him. He didn’t exactly know why they were expected of him, but Hulda had taught him to always respect and obey the words of the queen.

As Loki grew, Frigga had taken to teaching him other skills as well; the proper ways to walk, how to host his guests, how to properly groom himself, and, as he got older, how to maintain finances, settle arguments in legal feuds, and the various laws and regulations of Asgard. Loki didn’t understand why these things mattered so much, but he gave the queen his rapt attention, savoring in the approving smile that she would grant him when he had done something she liked. If he had done particularly well in their lessons, she would take him to her private weaving room, the one place where no one but the queen was allowed to enter. She promised to teach him her craft once he was old enough.

On very rare occasions, the Allfather himself would visit Loki’s chambers. The visits were few and far in between, lasting mere minutes, but even as a child, Loki knew the importance of them. Each time he would bow to Odin in the manner that Hulda and Frigga had taught him and stay silent unless directly spoken to by the king. The conversations were always the same. Odin would ask how Loki’s studies were faring, if there was anything that he required, and idle comments on how Loki had grown since his last visit.

Before leaving his chambers, though, Odin would always have Loki inspected. These inspections scared him at first, as he was ordered to strip bare before Odin’s one-eyed gaze. The king never
touched him, though, but rather just looked over the boy’s pale skin and sometimes mutter that “it was still holding.” Loki never understood what he meant by that. At the end of the inspections, Odin would always kneel down and whisper into Loki’s ear that someday the boy would fulfill a great purpose for the realm of Asgard. He would tell Loki that his future was one of the most important in all of the nine realms. What he never told Loki, though, was what exactly that glorious purpose was. He never thought to question it.

Loki would not discover his purpose and importance to Asgard until his first flowering.

Even after all of the centuries that had passed, Loki remembers that morning very clearly. The orange glow of the morning suns had filtered through his window and shone onto his face. It wasn’t the light that had woken him, though, but rather the warmth of the sunlight on his skin.

He had always had a low tolerance for heat and would often become sick if he became overheated. As a babe, this had caused Hulda much grief as his nurse desperately sought ways to keep his temperature down; a difficult task to manage in the shining, golden realm of Asgard. There were many times in the early days when Hulda was certain she would lose Loki to fever, but the boy seemed persistent in his will to survive. Since then, Hulda ensured to always take precautions to keep Loki safe from the natural warmth of Asgard.

That morning, though, the rays of the twin suns infiltrated Loki’s room and his skin began to burn in his sleep. He woke quickly, tears already welling in his eyes from the pain, but they didn’t spill over until he looked down and saw that his white sleeping gown was stained with blood. He had jumped from his bed and found more blood soaking through the sheets and into the feather mattress. It was when he felt the sticky wetness on his thighs that he screamed for Hulda. His nurse answered his calls quickly and did all she could to calm the frightened boy. When he asked what was happening to him, though, Hulda told him that he needed to wash himself to clean the blood, then she would explain everything to him.

Loki remembers crying as he stripped off his sleeping gown and saw the dried blood on his skin. As he grabbed a cloth and scrubbed himself clean with water from the basin he heard voices coming from his bedchambers. The voices belonged to several of the serving women that he had met over the years. He couldn’t make out every word, but he heard Hulda’s voice giving them commands and the sound of sheets being ripped. When Hulda came into the washroom, she was followed by several other women carrying pales of lukewarm water. Hulda had Loki bathe before she began to explain what was happening to his body.

From her explanations, Loki gathered that his body had gone through a maturing stage, that this terrifying event was completely natural and that all of the women of Asgard must go through this change. Loki was confused by her explanation, though, as he was a male. Everyone referred to Loki as a male, he had the correct male parts, and if this were the case, he should not be experiencing a female flowering. Hulda had just looked at him with weary eyes and told him that she would not be the one to explain this to him. All she could do for him was assure him that the bleeding would end in a few days and provide him with devices she had made from sewing animal skins over small bundles of wool. She showed Loki how to wear them under his smallclothes in order to catch the blood and keep it from creating another mess. That was probably the most mortifying moment that Loki had ever experienced in his childhood.

Once Hulda had shown him what to do, the serving women who had bathed him began to groom him. This was unusual for Loki as only he and Hulda took care of his daily grooming. The women brushed and plaited his long hair, threading thin strings of silver into the long braid going down his back. One woman had Loki hold completely still as she applied dark lines of kohl around his eyes while another applied a fine powder to his skin, making his already pale complexion lighter. When
they held the glass in front of him, Loki couldn’t help but be taken aback by his reflection. The
green of his eyes were intensified by the kohl the woman had put on him and his skin looked like
finessly polished marble.

When the women were satisfied with his appearance, Hulda brought him back out into his
chambers. The stained mattress was gone and on Loki’s chair there lay a gown he had never seen
before. The majority of Loki’s wardrobe consisted of light tunics and loose breeches, and on the
very few occasions, long skirts that Hulda had made for him when the heat became too much, but
this was clearly women’s clothing. When he said as much to Hulda, she told him not to ask
questions and that he must place the gown on.

Still confused by the meaning of everything, Loki stood still as the women dressed him carefully
into the gown. The garment consisted of a dark green silken skirt that touched the floor in a puddle
of fabric. A black silk tunic was pulled carefully over his head. The tunic stopped at the hem of the
skirt and the fabric was cut low, as if to show the cleavage that he did not posses, and the sleeves
dangled low on the underside of his wrists. Over the tunic the women placed a dark green corset
with silver flowered embroidery. Loki whimpered as the women pulled the laces of the corset so
tightly that he the air was expelled from his lungs. It seemed so much time had passed before their
tortures were done and Loki was allowed to examine himself in the full-length glass. Again, he was
shocked by his appearance. The gown he was wearing seemed far too extravagant in comparison to
the simple red and gold surcoat dresses of the serving women and Hulda. The only other person he
had seen dressed in this fashion was Frigga, but Hulda explained it was because of her royal status.
So Loki had to wonder, why was he being made to dress as the queen?

“You look beautiful, my boy.” Hulda was looking at Loki with tears welling in her eyes. The
corner of her lips were turned upwards slightly in a forced smile, but Loki could see that it did not
reach her eyes. He knew then that she was hiding something from him.

“What is going on?”

Hulda didn’t answer him. Instead she stepped forward and produced a silver headpiece from
behind her back. Careful not to disrupt one hair on Loki’s head, she placed the braided silver circket
onto his brow, the point of the circket coming to rest on the center of his forehead. When it was
done, Hulda wiped a stray tear from the corner of her eye before leaning down to press a kiss to the
boy’s cheek.

“Come,” she said as she pulled back, “they will be expecting you now.”

“Who will?”

“You are to be presented to the court now, Loki. All of Asgard will finally be able to see the jewel
that the Allfather brought to our realm.”

“A-all of Asgard?”

Loki had long ago learned from his caretakers and tutors that Asgard was a thriving, golden realm
with millions of inhabitants that consisted of royalty, high society, workers and common-folk.
However, the only people Loki had ever known were a handful of servants, guards, his tutors, and
the king and queen. For a long time, Loki had convinced himself that perhaps they were the only
people who truly existed in this realm.

“Yes, but don’t be frightened, dear. No one will hurt you. They’ve been waiting for this day for a
long time.”
Finally, Loki had to ask. “Why? Why am I doing this? What is so important about me?”

Hulda, though, did not answer him. She merely cupped his cheek, telling him all would be revealed in due time. Loki didn’t understand, but he could not argue with her as she pulled him along and out into the main hall where they were greeted by five members of the Einherjar. Everyone remained silent as they marched the boy through the palace corridors to the throne room where much of Asgard’s population had gathered to finally catch even a fleeting glimpse of the boy who had been locked away for so long.

For Loki, though, his silence was one of awe. In all of his centuries as a ward of the king, he had never seen this part of the palace before. The boy was accustomed to the gilded walls of the palace from what he had been allowed to see, but as the group moved further along, the golden walls adorned only by metal sconces gave way to giant, brilliantly colored tapestries that stretched throughout the hallways.

As they walked, Loki absorbed the sight of the tapestries as much as he could when he realized that the weavings were telling the story of the nine realms. The dark weavings began with the endless void Ginnungagap, bordered by the realm of ice, Niflheim, and the realm of fire, Muspelheim. Moving along he saw the giant Ymir and his son being nourished by the cow Audumla. From Ymir’s image, there came more large creatures, blue in their skin tone with eyes the color of blood. Loki knew them to be the Frost Giants of Jotunheim, but Kvasir and Mimir had always been vague on their lessons of that particular race. The group moved along and the weavings depicted three men killing the giant Ymir, using the giant’s body to create the glorious Yggdrasil and the remainder of the nine realms. Loki recognized the figure of the young man seated on the throne of the newly constructed Asgard, though in this picture, the king had possessed both eyes.

The boy’s eyes grew wide with wonder as the histories were laid out in such exquisite detail. The creation of Askr and Embla, the first humans of Midgard; the three wells of the Norns at the roots of the world tree; the creation of the Bifrost bridge which connected Asgard to the various realms; on and on it went until the weavings began to tell simpler stories. Loki once again saw images of the Allfather seated on his Hlidskjalf, though this time he was accompanied by a beautiful woman seated equally at his right side. It took Loki a moment before he recognized the woman to be Frigga, as the image was so old, she looked to be barely older than Loki himself. The remaining tapestries focused more on the royal couple, some with them seated in their glory, others with the two holding up a child with golden hair… Loki never knew that Frigga had a child.

Suddenly, the images grew darker in both color and depictions. They portrayed the humans of Midgard being slaughtered by the giant blue creatures, one of whom bore in his hands a large casket. The Allfather appeared later in the tapestry, seemingly challenging the giant who wielded the casket. A great battle was portrayed for several yards of the weaving, until finally the giant was shown in a pose of supplication underneath Odin who was brandishing Gungnir. The Allfather was then shown to be standing victorious, flanked by the soldiers of the Aesir as he held high above his head the blue casket of the giant. And then… the tapestries ended. Not for lack of space, though, as the entourage was still making their way through the large corridor. Rather, it seemed that this story was not over just yet. Idly, Loki wondered if it was Frigga who had made these beautiful tapestries. He had seen her at her craft before, and she had promised to show him how to do it as well.

It was several more minutes before they reached giant double doors. More of the Einherjar were waiting for them there, but they said nothing as they fell into line behind the current procession. Only two remained to open the doors for the group, and when they had, Loki was blinded by the intense light of the room. Loki almost fell back from the awful glare burning into his retinas, but
Hulda was there to catch him, whispering in his ear that he would be alright. It was a long time until Loki’s eyes adjusted to the light, but even so they had still burned. The room, much like the other halls of the palace, was made of pure, polished gold. However, on the left, the wall of the great throne room was removed, leaving nothing but an open courtyard that let in both the blinding light of Asgard’s suns, as well as thousands of its inhabitants who had come to witness this day.

Loki was terrified by the sight of so many people after so long in his isolated childhood. Though he had always wished to see more of the palace where he was kept and discover the realm which he called home, he was suddenly wishing for nothing more than to crawl back into his bedchamber and believe that it was only he and Hulda in the world. His nurse, however, had other plans.

“You must walk, Loki,” she told him firmly. “You do not have to look at them if you don’t want to, but you must walk forward. The Allfather is expecting you.” She motioned forward where Loki saw Odin standing before Hlidskjaf, looking down over his public.

Loki swallowed down a lump in his throat and gave the only reply he could, a simple nod of his head. As a child, words were never his strong suit; that would come later in his life. At that moment, though, he was just a frightened boy trusting in the only mother he had ever known and the royal couple who had given him shelter for all of those years. So Loki takes a brave step forward, then another, and another still, until he is walking mechanically at a steady pace towards the Allfather.

From all around, Loki could hear whispers from the many witnesses surrounding him on all sides. Words like ‘small,’ ‘graceful,’ and ‘fair’ were intermingled with words like ‘giant,’ ‘whelp,’ and ‘monster,’ leaving Loki more confused than any other event that had transpired. The boy just remembered to keep breathing steadily like Hulda showed him how to do whenever he felt overwhelmed. Whenever he felt frightened, he just remembered to breathe and focus on what was important, and then nothing would seem so scary. At that moment, what was important was just making it through the throne room and up to where the Allfather was waiting. When he looked up towards his end destination again, he noticed that Frigga was there as well. The queen smiled warmly down to him, and he felt that perhaps he could make it through this after all.

Loki kept his breathing steady all the way to the steps of Odin’s seat, where Frigga stepped down to greet him. She kissed both of his cheeks lightly before taking him by the arm gently to lead him up. Odin, for his part, remained standing where he was, his one eye looking out straight.

“You look so lovely, dear Loki,” Frigga whispered gently to him. “Asgard has been waiting so long for this day.”

“Waiting for what, exactly?”

“Silence, dear,” she shushed. “All will be explained momentarily.” Her words did nothing to lessen the boy’s confusion.

There was the sound of a thundering crash and the crowd exploded in a roar of applause. Loki jumped at the deafening noise, his heart beat wildly in his chest as the people began chanting a single word. “Thor! Thor! Thor!”

“He always did like to make an entrance,” Frigga said close to Loki’s ear.

“Who?”

The queen smiled and pointed towards the entrance way that Loki had just come through. Walking towards them was a young man dressed in silver armor and a flowing crimson cape. The man was
waving and smiling brightly to his adoring crowd as he raised a large hammer above his head. Loki didn’t know who this man was, but the audience most certainly seemed to love him. The man continued his march towards the throne, not once looking up to the king and queen, but rather waving his arms and strutting about like a bird displaying its plumage.

As he got closer, Loki took the chance to take in his features. He was a large man, his body comprised mostly of muscle mass, giving him a more aged appearance. His face, however, still had the round cheeks of a youth. His jaw was pointed and would no doubt become more prominent with age. Light stubble littered his jaw-line where soon a beard would begin to grow, but for now it would be some time before it came in fully. Beneath his silver helm, Loki saw golden hair that reached down to his shoulders. Golden hair that was the same color as the queen’s.

It is only when he was standing at the base of the steps of Hlidskjaf that he gave one last bow to the public and turned to face Odin and Frigga. Only then did the familiar hush return to the crowd and Odin took a step forward.

“Citizens of Asgard,” the Allfather’s voice boomed out, vibrating through the throne room. “It was not so many years ago when all of the nine realms faced a threat like no other. Laufey, King of Jotunheim, with the Casket of Ancient Winters set out to conquer Midgard, threatening the lives of the defenseless mortals. Laufey sought to make himself and the frost giants supreme rulers of Yggdrasil… The Frost Giants had forgotten their place.”

The crowd cheered at the king’s words while Loki simply watched, trying his best to take it all in. He only knew vaguely of the war Odin was talking about. Kvasir had mentioned it once in his tutoring sessions, but he had never broached the subject further than that. The boy wondered why this was relevant now, and what this all had to do with his morning blood.

“Through much suffering and death, mighty Asgard prevailed in the war against the Frost Giants and exiled them back into their realm of ice and darkness.” Another loud cheer erupted from the crowd, causing Loki’s ears to ring.

“In his defeat, King Laufey gave over his two most precious possessions. The Casket of Ancient Winters and his first born, the crowned prince of Jotunheim, Loki Laufeyjarson.”

Loki only vaguely remembers what the Allfather said after that. His heart had stilled in his chest and his thoughts began racing. Frost Giant. Son of Laufey. Prince of Jotunheim. Loki’s first reaction was to look down at his hand. The skin there was a pale white, free from any single blemish or freckle. It didn’t make any sense. In the tapestries, the Frost Giants were shown to be blue and scarred, with eyes the color of blood. But Loki’s eyes were green, his skin was the fairest of anyone that he knew. He couldn’t be a Frost Giant. He couldn’t!

It didn’t even register to Loki that the young man in the crimson cloak had moved until he was standing directly in front of him. Bright blue eyes bore intensely into Loki as they raked over the boy’s body. Loki felt a tremor go through his body. The young man began to smile at him, tight lipped and forced, showing the wrinkles of his dimples which any other person would have found charming, but Loki remained tense. The young man’s hand reached forward and Loki flinched, but Frigga’s firm hand on his back kept him from retreating. The young man took one of Loki’s hands in his own before he raised it to his lips, placing a light kiss on his knuckles. Once again the crowd cheered their approval.

“Thor Odinson, crowned prince of Asgard,” Loki’s head jerked to the side when he heard Odin’s voice. The king had stepped forward, a warm smile gracing his features as he placed a hand on the young man’s shoulder-- on his son’s shoulder. “It is through the princes of this realm that an eternal peace will finally be found.”
The young man-- Thor, smiled brightly at his father before he pulled Loki forward out of Frigga’s embrace to stand beside him and face the adoring crowd. Loki simply stood there frozen in his shock as the prince raised his arm high in the air as a sign of triumph, eating up the crowd’s applause. When he released Loki’s hand, he stepped behind the boy and Loki felt something being placed over his head. Thor was placing a necklace over him. The cool feeling of metal hit his sternum. Looking down, the boy saw a metal pendant dangling around his neck from a silver chain. The pendant was intricately crafted with knots and whorls that Loki swore he saw glowing with a faint green light. The pendant itself looked reminiscent of the hammer that the other prince was seen carrying. It was a symbol of his chosen weapon. Loki’s eyes scanned the people around him before they landed on Hulda. The woman simply gave him a resigned look and a thin lipped smile, and suddenly, everything fell into place in Loki’s mind.

All of the things he never questioned in his life suddenly began to make sense. His isolation, his tutoring of the histories and politics of the realms, Frigga’s lessons on keeping a household and weaving, his inspections by Odin, every little part of his life that led to this moment began to take on a much more important meaning. That combined with the new revelations concerning his identity helped Loki to realize what was going on, why he had been treated so differently that morning and paraded out to the people of Asgard. He was not a ward of the royal family; he was their captive and he had been groomed for this moment, the moment when he would take what was seen as his rightful place. As he began to comprehend exactly what was happening, all of his confusion gave way to an intense anger, coiled into the pit of his stomach like a hissing snake. The scenery around him-- the people, the noise, all of the golden glory of Asgard-- faded away from his senses and all he saw was red.

Loki had finally learned his purpose. And it was horrifying.
“You’re rather small for a Frost Giant, aren’t you?” Those are the first words Loki received from his betrothed.

After the show of presenting him to the people of Asgard, the royal family led Loki out of the throne room and into a smaller hall where tables were set for a small feast. The table seemed even larger with just the royal family, Loki, and his nurse occupying the places that would easily sit over twenty. Loki felt even smaller being sat next to the large prince.

“Thor, be polite,” his mother chided softly.

“Well he is,” the prince replied with a roll of his eyes. Another stern look from the queen had Thor giving a dramatic sigh before he pulled himself together and turned to give Loki a forced smile. “So tell me about yourself, Loki.”

“What is it that my prince wishes to know?” Loki replied with an even tone.

“What are your interests? Your hobbies?”

The question was enough to make Loki laugh. Short, loud and bitter. His hobbies up until this point had consisted of being locked away in his gilded cage, with an occasional visit to Idunn’s gardens if he had been good. He didn’t have his own interests. All Loki had known was just what the king and queen had imposed on him. There was nothing that the boy had that belonged solely to him. He was their puppet, and until now he was too foolish to realize it.

“You will forgive him, Prince Thor,” Hulda spoke for him, “the excitement of the day must have been too much for him.”

“It must have been overwhelming,” Frigga nodded in agreement. “We do apologize for not giving you more time to prepare, Loki. But you did very well today, dear. You’ve made us all very proud.”

“Anything I can do for the service of Asgard,” Loki smiled thinly to the queen. Frigga’s serene look never faltered, but there was something in her eyes-- something close to pity-- that showed she could sense Loki’s discontent.

Loki ate the rest of his meal mostly in silence, speaking only when Thor or Frigga asked him a question. Odin remained silent throughout. When he wasn’t speaking, Loki listened to the exchange between Thor and his mother. There was no hiding the affection in her tone when she spoke to her golden son, but Thor’s responses to her were always brash, bordering on disrespect. The boy watched as the prince ate and was nearly appalled by what he saw. All of his own meals up until that point had been taken in solitude with either Hulda or Frigga, so he wasn’t used to eating in the company of other men. Thor ripped into the hide of a boar with his bare hands, grease and blood dripping from his fingers. Mead from his goblet spilt over and ran down his chin. Loki had to watch as the prince drained one goblet after another, always shattering the empty cup onto the floor, shattering it before demanding another. Disgusted, Loki pushed his own plate away.

“Are you not hungry, little giant?” Thor asked him.
Loki forced himself to bite back the remark itching to be released. Even after the horrifying events of the day, though, he clung to the courtesies that he had been raised with.

“Not at the moment, my prince. I fear that I have lost my appetite for the day.”

“Thor, why don’t you take Loki for a tour around the palace grounds?” Frigga suggested. “Now that Loki has been introduced to court, he’ll be able to see more of what Asgard has to offer. It would do him good to know his home better.”

“No to disagree with you, your highness,” Hulda spoke up hesitantly, “but with Loki’s condition, I believe it would be better until the suns have set more before he tours the grounds.”

“Oh dear, I had forgotten,” she laughed lightly. “With the illusion it is so easy to forget his condition.”

His condition? It was one thing for them to speak as if Loki were not present, but it was worse when they spoke about secrets pertaining to him. Secrets that had yet to be revealed to him. If Loki’s hand gripped a little tighter around the knife he was using and his breathing began to come in angry pants, he felt it was justified. He needed to get away from these people before he did something drastic.

“Actually, if it is alright, I would be very interested to see the library of Asgard. Kvasir often said it was the finest font of knowledge in all the realms. I’ve wanted to see it for as long as I can remember.”

“That’s a wonderful idea, Loki. Thor, show him to the library,” Frigga commanded.

The golden prince gave another exaggerated roll of his eyes before he sat up from their bench and extended a hand down to Loki. With everyone’s eyes on him, Loki couldn’t refuse it. When Thor pulled Loki to his side and placed his arm around him, the boy was fuming, but he could do nothing about it under Odin’s watchful eye. As soon as they were out of the dining hall, though, Loki pulled away. He will act the part before the king and queen, but he’d be damned if he would let himself go into the prince’s arms willingly.

Thor said nothing about it and began to lead Loki along the corridor. He kept pace with the prince and from behind him he heard the sound of steps following, but was relieved to see it was only Hulda. He may be angry at the woman, but she made for far better company at the moment.

“You don’t speak much, do you, little giant?” Thor spoke after a long time.

“I do not have much to say at the moment, my prince.”

“You may call me Thor. We are to be married some day, you may as well become accustomed to saying it.”

“I will as soon as you refer to me by my own name, my prince.” His response earned him a scoff from Thor and a sound of disappointment from Hulda.

“So then, Loki, is it true what they say of Frost Giants?”

“What truth would that be?”

The prince stopped and smirked before he leaned down to whisper in Loki’s ear, “That you all possess a cunt as well as a cock?”
Loki stepped back abruptly from the prince, but the young man was just standing there with a smug expression waiting for him to answer. Through clenched teeth, Loki replies, “Though I know little of the Jotnar biology, it would appear that particular rumor would be correct, if my morning’s blood is anything to go by. Would you like to see my bleeding cunt for yourself, Thor?”

“Loki!” Hulda was on him in a moment, pulling him away from the prince and whispering all sorts of admonishments in his ear. The prince just seemed amused by the whole spectacle.

“You have quite the mouth on you, little giant. For a moment I was concerned that my father was granting me with nothing more than a waif with a pretty face.”

“I am happy to be of amusement to you, my prince. You’ll have to forgive me, though. Flyting was not one of the lessons of my studies to train me to be your bride. Though, I have no doubt that in your company I will soon master the art.”

With that smug expression still plastered to his face, Thor stepped forward and raised his hand to tilt Loki’s chin up. Loki did not shy away from his touch this time, but rather held the prince’s gaze defiantly.

“I think I am going to like you,” he said, “but you should have more care how you speak.”

“My prince,” Hulda stepped forward to separate the two before things could escalate. “I am sure that you have many matters to attend to. Allow me to assist Loki to the library. You may return to your business.”

Thor turned to the woman to give her his charming smile. Loki didn’t miss the slight hitch in the older woman’s breath. Even she didn’t seem immune to the handsomeness and charm of the older prince. Loki couldn’t help but feel a sting of betrayal at that little revelation. Thor bid them goodbye, placed another unwanted kiss on Loki’s knuckles, and promised that the next evening he would show him the Bifrost. As soon as he was gone Hulda began her scolding.

“That was most impolite, Loki.”

“I will not apologize to anyone for my behavior, least of all you.”

“Now you’re just being rude.”

“And you’re a liar!” Loki hissed, pulling away from her. How dare the woman stand there and lecture him as if he were the one to have done something wrong! All of his life he had trusted this woman, but he never truly knew her at all. Even in his isolation, Loki had never felt so alone.

“Loki,” she sighed. “It was never my intention to lie to you… But I am bound to the service of Asgard above all else.”

“Of course you are,” he laughed bitterly. “We are all bound to the Allfather’s whims. Who am I to defy the mighty Odin? Shall I go to the prince’s room now and spread my legs for him?”

“Do not speak that way!” She snapped. The nurse took a deep breath to calm herself and gently took hold of Loki’s arm. “We shouldn’t speak out here. Come, we’ll have more privacy in the library.”

Though he was loathe to listen to anything she had to say, Loki had no one else to turn to. So he stayed silent and allowed himself to be taken along the winding corridors and into the vast library of Asgard. Once inside, Loki’s breath was stolen from his lungs. The library was unlike anything he could ever imagine. It was roughly the same size of the great throne room, though instead of
being blinded by the golden light, the library’s vast content of shelves and tomes absorbed the glare from the outside, leaving it in a comfortable darkness. Loki’s eyes followed the golden pillars up to the domed roof where the ceiling was covered with various mosaics, often depicting the same stories in the tapestries.

Hulda pulled him along the rows of shelves as his eyes wandered upwards, trying to see how far they extended. The two went further into the darkness of the library until the only light that remained were the few candles that lined the rows. In the darkest corner, there was a single desk with one lone candle nearly burned down to the metal of the stick holding it in place. It was there that Hulda finally set him down.

“Why have you never brought me here before?” It was the first thing Loki could think to say, and for some reason it felt like one of the greatest outrages he’d experienced that day.

“Keep your voice down,” she shushed. “You’re never truly alone, no matter where you go. Do well to remember that. As for your question, I was not allowed to bring you here. The Allfather did not want you wandering the palace where anyone could see… Not that there would be too many citizens who would come here of their own freewill.”

“Kvasir always talked about this library… I- I just never imagined it would be this wonderful.”

“You will be allowed here any time you choose now, provided that you have a chaperone to accompany you.”

“Why did you never tell me what they had planned for me… or about what I am?”

“Darling,” she sighed sadly. “If it were up to me I would have told you everything from the beginning. You deserved to know the truth about who you are and why having you here is so important to the nine realms.”

“Why exactly is it so important? If what little I know is true, then Odin destroyed Jotunheim during the war. What did taking the Casket-- taking me accomplish?”

“It is a lot to explain, Loki. I wasn’t there when Odin defeated King Laufey that day outside of Utgard, so I can’t tell you exactly what happened. What I know is that the Casket of Ancient Winters was the great power source of Jotunheim. It gave the Frost Giants the strength they needed to conquer Midgard before the Allfather stopped them. To ensure that they would never attempt war against any of the realms again, Odin took their power source… and Jotunheim has resided in darkness ever since.”

“So why did he take me?”

“I… I can’t give you that reason, Loki. I would like to say that perhaps the Allfather saw a small babe crying alone in the ice and snow, and knew that he could offer that babe a better life than one of darkness.”

“…But that’s not the truth, is it?”

“I believe that it is, in some small way. When they placed you in my arms for the first time, you were so small, Loki. I can’t say that I’ve had too much experience with Jontar children, but from what I’ve seen in tomes, the average size of one of their babes would be the equivalent of a small child. I couldn’t even begin to imagine the hardships that would endure for a child so small in a land where the people are so large. If you were not crushed, then you would have been an outcast even amongst your own people.”
“So the prince was right. I am small for a Frost Giant.”

“Yes. The light of Asgard doesn’t help with your nature, either. You hail from a land of ice and darkness, so the light of this realm would kill you if not for the illusion the Allfather placed on you.”

“Can it ever be removed?”

She paused for a moment, her eyes widened in confusion before she slowly shook her head. “No, it cannot. Odin’s magic is unparalleled and there has yet to come any seidkonur or seidmenn who comes close to matching his power. Besides, both the king and queen agreed that you shouldn’t feel different or ostracized in your new home.”

“Ostracized?” He scoffed. “I spent the majority of my life believing that the world ended outside of my door.”

“That was for your protection. Even after all of these years, there are those who would not take kindly to the thought of a Frost Giant living in the palace of Asgard, let alone marrying the crown prince.”

“So that was the plan all along then.”

“…Would it matter now? What’s done is done, Loki. And this,” she touches the pendant hanging around his neck, “signifies that you’re Thor’s betrothed now.”

“Please, Hulda. If you’ve ever held some love for me, then tell me why.” There were tears welling in the boy’s eyes and he hated himself for looking so weak when he was so angry. But he was just so tired of all the lies for one day. This woman owed him the truth.

“Loki,” she cupped his cheek, “darling I would consider you my own son. You’re the only child I will ever have, but you must realize that everything the Allfather does, it is for a purpose. He has given you a purpose now, rather than to waste your life away in a dying realm.”

“My purpose,” he repeated. Yes, he knew exactly what his purpose was. “Odin wants to bind the realms through me. By marrying me off to that… beast.”

“Prince Thor may be a bit brash, I will grant you that much. However, he does have a good heart. Someday he will be king and you will be his queen.”

“Why do you assume that is something that I want!” He snapped. “Until this day I knew nothing of his existence and now it’s been announced before the entire realm that I’m to be his wife. If all that Odin said was true, then I am a prince in my own right. I do not deserve to be used like some broodmare so that Odin can establish his own puppet king in Jotunheim!”

Hulda didn’t say anything more. Her blue eyes looked away from him, resigned to the fact that she could not make this better for the boy. He had every right to be angry. Even she could admit that Odin’s isolation of the boy bordered on cruelty, even though it had genuinely been for his own protection. If she had it her own way, then the two princes would have known each other long before this day. They would have been raised alongside each other and Loki would have known the truth of his heritage from the beginning. The Allfather, however, wanted to prevent the boys from forming any familial bonds, so he thought it best that they be kept apart until Loki experienced his first flowering. The king was somehow under the impression that once the boy experienced his first blood, he would be susceptible to the “irrationalness of his feminine nature.” Even Hulda had to roll her eyes at that explanation.
The nurse had meant what she said, though. Prince Thor was a brash young man, but there was no
doubting his loyalty to his home or family. He was still just a boy himself and he had years to grow
and mature into the wonderful king she knew he would make. Aside from that, he was a devilishly
handsome young man. She knew Loki would come to see it in time. There was still a lot he needed
to adjust to.

“How long?”

“Until what, dear?”

“How long do I have until we’re wed?”

“You are both still young and will not be ready for some time. Thor is still being trained for the
day that he will ascend Hlidskjaf. Until he has proven himself worthy to both Odin and Asgard,
then the two of you will remain simply betrothed.”

“…I see.”

“Loki?”

“How many texts are in this library?” He asked abruptly.

“Countless,” she answered. “This is the greatest library in all of the nine realms. They contain texts
from days long ago and from every corner of Yggdrasil.”

“Would it be possible to read about Jotunheim and the Frost Giants? I would like to learn more
about what I am. More than what anyone here can tell me.”

“Of course. How much did you need?”

“All of it,” he answered. “Every tome that even contains the word Jotunheim, I want it. It doesn’t
matter which realm. I want them all.”

“That is a long list, Loki. Shall I have them brought to your room?”

“No,” he shook his head. “I will read here. I like it here. You are not required to stay.”

“I’m afraid that you’re not allowed without a chaperone, so I will stay with you. I will find Kvasir
and we’ll begin to find the texts that you need.”

The remainder of that dreadful day was spent with Loki hunched over his desk, still wearing that
damnable dress, as he read anything and everything he could about Jotunheim and its people. A
majority of the texts were repetitive, often speaking of the “evil King Laufey” and the “race of
monsters” that had tried to destroy Midgard. By the time the suns had set and Hulda was snoring
softly on the desk beside him, Loki had known everything about the war between the Frost Giants
and the Aesir, and even a few of the Midgardian legends that were long ago forgotten in their own
realm.

The texts regarding his race that were written by the Aesir and the Vanir weren’t very helpful when
they weren’t discussing the war. A vast number of the texts spoke about the massive height of the
Frost Giants, their blue skin with heritage lines which-- according to the tomes-- was carved into
the flesh of the babes after their birth, and their race being deemed ergi because of their one-sexed
nature. That part cleared up a lot for Loki. Other texts he found depicted the Frost Giants as savage
cannibals who would sacrifice their kin to the elements for prosperous crops and fishing. Loki was
still reading by the time the suns rose the next morning, though he grew more disturbed the further
He allowed himself to be pulled away from the library by Hulda, and for the remainder of the day he played the part of the obedient child for her. He studied with Mimir that day and took a meal with Frigga. She later brought him out to meet with the women of the court. The goddess were gathered in a room much like Frigga’s special weaving room, seated in a circle as they talked and sewed together. Frigga introduced him to the ladies Freyja, Idunn, Sjofn, and Vor, as well as two girls closer to Loki’s own age, Nanna and Sigyn. Loki was invited into their sewing circle so that he may make friends with the ladies at court and learn the various gossips of the realm. This particular torture would become a daily occurrence for the poor boy.

That evening, after the suns set, Thor collected Loki to give him a tour of the Bifrost. Once more, the prince seemed more concerned with the curiosities beneath Loki’s skirts than with anything that the boy had to say. He put his hands too familiarly on Loki and grew annoyed when the boy attempted to pull away from him. Loki took the prince’s behavior and attempted fondling in stride, if anything just so that he could witness the beauty of the Bifrost. It was the farthest he had ever been outside of the palace, and it was indescribable.

The bridge was made of every spectrum of color and few that Loki could never imagine, stretched out over a vast river that flowed down into the abyss of space. At the edge of the Bifrost, the realm was guarded by the giant god Heimdal, whose eyes could see anything and everything in the nine. It was unlike anything Loki could ever imagine, and it angered him further that something of this great beauty was hidden just out of his reach for so long. Thor gave him a long winded speech about the history of the bridge and, most importantly, its role in connecting Asgard to the various other realms in Yggdrasil. When Loki asked if he could ever see one of the realms, Thor had just laughed.

That night, Loki was back in the library with another chaperone, as he continued his research of his identity.

And so time passed in this fashion. Loki’s days consisted of forced lessons with his two tutors or Frigga, afternoon with the ladies of court, and his evenings with Thor before he would retreat to the library for what little solitude he could find. Within four months time, Loki had read everything pertaining to the Jotnar that the library had to offer. The Aesir texts were of no great help in discovering his identity. It wasn’t until he began researching through the ancient tomes of Alfheim that he found something which could be considered objective in discussing the Jontar.

In the gap between Niflheim and Muspelheim, the giant Ymir was formed from the meeting of fire and ice. Ymir was of one sex and so this was passed on to his first creation, the Frost Giants of Jotunheim. This race was formed directly from Ymir’s body, specifically from the sweat of his left arm. The cow which gave nourishment to Ymir was born of the same ice, and she licked the salt of the ice to nourish herself, leading to the creation of Buri, Odin’s grandsire. Buri’s son, Bor, went on to marry one of Ymir’s offspring, the giant Bestla. From this union, Odin, Vili and Ve were born.

So the two races were connected in the beginning. They were a part of the same family, born of the same cosmic parents. It just so happened that the Jotnar were born of the great Ymir, while the Aesir were the creation of the great cow. The thought of it made Loki laugh out loud. However, the rest of the story filled him with sorrow. Odin, Vili and Ve, for some reason, turned on their creators and destroyed Ymir. So much blood flowed from Ymir’s body that the abyss of Ginnungagap was filled and all of the Jontar were drowned, save for Bergelmir and his mate. These two somehow managed to survive in a small boat and took refuge from the flood of Ymir’s blood. It was through these two that the race survived and started again. The rest of the story was what Loki already knew, the creation of Yggdrasil and the remaining realms from Ymir’s body, as
So the war was not the first time that Odin attempted to destroy the Frost Giants? Loki couldn’t help but wonder why. Why had Odin turned on his creator? Why did he try to destroy the giants? He had drawn first blood by attacking Ymir, so it seemed only natural that they would have tried to seek vengeance against the man who had nearly wiped out their race.

The Alfheim texts revealed other truths to Loki. The scars on their flesh were not mutilations, but rather marks from their birth, telling of their lineage as well as their future roles in society. While the other tomes indicated that all of the Jontar were savage, deformed, and monstrous giants, these writings described many Jotnar who were of the same size of the Aesir or Vanir. Loki did feel a sense of pride when the texts mentioned that these smaller giants were often considered the most beautiful of the realm. Further readings revealed even more than Loki could imagine, the most unsettling story, though, came from the telling of Freyr, ruler of Alfheim and his consort Gerd.

From what he gathered in the reading, Freyr was given permission to seat on Hlidskjaf, where upon he looked out across the worlds and saw the most beautiful creature on Jotunheim. He was determined to have the Frost Giant. Freyr sent his page Skirnir to Gerd to convince him to return to Alfheim and become the bride of the king. Gerd had refused. Soon, Skirnir attempted to bribe the Jotun into returning with him, before he threatened Gerd with banishment and a life devoid of pleasure unless he lie with Freyr. Seeing no other choice, Gerd went with Skirnir and into Freyr’s bed with tears in his eyes… Loki was led to the conclusion that either the person who wrote that tome either truly despised the king of Alfheim, or the king was just that unapologetic in his actions. If Loki had to guess, it was the latter.

Loki learned much and more from the stories in the Alfheim texts. Namely, that the history between Asgard and Jotunheim was filled with slights from both sides. For a majority of the history, though, the Aesir forced the Jotnar into submission, often stealing their wealth, knowledge, and people. But when King Laufey attempted to step out of the shadow of Asgard, to bring their people out from beneath Odin’s heel, they were seen as a threat. The Aesir were quick to remind them of their place in the nine realms… Loki didn’t need to read any more after that.

He made a vow to himself that he would not allow himself to be crushed beneath his captor’s heel. He will not be like Gerd and go submissively and in tears to Thor’s bed. He will not be the pawn of the man who had for so long tried to wipe out his race. He will fight against it until his dying breath… and he knew just how he would do it too.

One of the great revelations of Loki’s research was that, for their great tragedy, the line of Bergelmir were granted a great gift by the Norns. Every Jotnar possesses the power of seidr. All Loki needed was practice and time.

Chapter End Notes

I forgot to mention this before, but the ages I'm picturing for Loki and Thor when they first meet are about 13 and 16 respectively. I wanted to write more and get into Loki’s interest of magic and mischief, but it's almost three in the morning, so hopefully this will be enough for now. Tony won't be making an appearance just yet, but he'll be coming soon.

In the next chapter, Loki begins learning his "womanly" arts of magic and combat, and
learns a thing or two about mischief from a familiar trickster. We'll also see a bit more of the possessive Thor that I so love to hate.
Years passed and Loki grew in many ways. He grew taller, more lovely, and stronger. His countless nights spent hunched over ancient texts in Kvasir’s library gave Loki the knowledge to realize his natural abilities that were hidden deep inside of himself, in a place he never knew existed. The first time he felt the presence of his seidr it had frightened him. A feeling of shock had gone through his entire body, shooting sparks through every nerve ending, making his skin tingle and feel as if it were burning. Loki remembered feeling a sense of dread, as if this thing hidden inside of him would burn him from the inside out. But when the sensations became almost too much for his body to bear, they suddenly stopped. His skin had become hyper sensitive, his senses more acute, and for the first time in his life Loki felt whole.

He thinks that he may have shed a tear the first time he saw the whips of green energy dance from his fingertips.

Unfortunately for Loki, his nightly studies did not go unnoticed. Hulda kept his secrets as much as she could when she chaperoned for him in the library. Other servants assigned to the task began idle gossip of Loki’s dedication to becoming not only a dutiful queen, but a knowledgeable one; someone worthy of Prince Thor. Others still began to whisper about the treacherous nature of the Frost Giant hiding in the shadows of Kvasir’s library. Because, surely, no matter how well trained the Allfather’s pet may be, the only reason a Frost Giant would have for knowledge would be a nefarious one. In the end, though, it was Heimdall who reported Loki’s activities to the king and queen. Unbeknownst to him, Heimdall was often charged with keeping watch of Loki now that he was free to leave his chambers when he wished. It seemed that servants could not be trusted with the complete honesty and dedication to Odin that Heimdall was required. On the day that he had first learned to direct the flame of his candle, he was called before the king and queen to explain his actions.

Loki knew that he tread thin ice with the Aesir, even in spite of their great plans for him. When asked to explain his actions, Loki recalled everything that he had learned from the gossip of the women of court and simply gave a demure smile to the royal couple. He explained that he wished to learn more about his natural seidr so that one day he may be able to assist his husband in any affair that required a skilled seidmenn.

It was no great secret that Prince Thor despised any man who would debase himself by using the cowardly art of magic, not if his casual use of the term *ergi* was anything to go by. His father was the only exception to his prejudices, only due to the fact that Odin had learned his art in a time before the skill of magic was considered a coward’s weapon. For the Aesir, seidr was a skill more suited for women who lacked the strength to naturally defeat their foe in battle.

In his readings, Loki learned that since the Jotnar were of one sex, they revered both strength and the cunning of seidr. He felt best not to mention that in the company of the king and queen, though.

Frigga, for her part, was thrilled by Loki’s excuse. From the gossips of Idunn and Sjofn, Loki learned that the queen of Asgard could be regarded as a fairly impressive seidkonur. In her weavings, she was said to have the gift of foresight and, if Idunn’s words were true, she also had the ability to shape-shift. Odin’s bride was allowed to practice in her magical arts. Why shouldn’t Loki be able to as well? After all, Thor would need all of the help he could get if he refused to share in his father’s knowledge of magic and the runes. So, begrudgingly, Odin had agreed to have
Loki tutored in the art of seidr.

Much to Loki’s surprise, his chosen tutor was Freyja. In his time in the sewing circles Loki had always dismissed the woman as a vain creature with a head filled of love songs and flowers. He was astonished to learn that beneath the exterior of a dainty noblewoman, she actually possessed quite a powerful amount of seidr. If one were to hear her say it, she was the one who taught the Allfather his magic, though his power far outweighed her own. Through her guidance, Loki learned to manipulate his natural abilities to his every whim. Within a year of their lessons, Loki could control elements, call upon both ice and fire, complete complex spells, and, much to his great delight, render himself invisible to the sight of those without the skill of seidr. Unfortunately, Heimdall himself was not one of those who would be fooled by his disappearing act.

In his second year with Freyja, Loki began to learn how to shift his shapes. When not appearing as her usual beautiful self, Freyja’s chosen form was often that of a wild animal, birds specifically. Loki’s first successful transformation was that of a magpie. To celebrate that first transformation, Freyja herself had shifted into the form of a falcon and showed Loki how to fly. Like a mother bird, she had nudged him gently from the window and allowed him to fall into the open air. As Loki fell towards the ground at an alarming rate, he didn’t fear death, but rather felt a sense of peace that he never knew in his life. When he had spread his wings and allowed himself to be carried on the wind he knew what that feeling truly was: freedom.

That became the routine of their lessons afterward. Freyja would assist Loki in mastering a certain spell or divination, then she would show him how to transform into a particular chosen beast, and the two would run or fly freely through the realm. In the shape of otters, the two floated in the great river beneath the rainbow bridge, looking up into the starry abyss at the edge of the world. As a pair of mares, Loki and Freyja explored the vast forests of Asgard, running in the sunlight that had for so long hurt Loki in his Aesir flesh. But Loki’s favorite form would always be that of the magpie, when he and Freyja would fly higher than the great golden spires of Asgard’s kingdom, looking down on the mighty realm that had for so long kept him caged and hidden away. In those moments, Loki felt that he loved Freyja.

As much as he would have liked it, Frejya could not monopolize all of Loki’s time. Along with his other lessons and his private readings--now in his chambers to avoid any more gossip--Loki was required to spend time getting to know his betrothed. For several hours every night, Loki was forced to dine with Thor and his family before Thor took him on one tour or another around the kingdom. A majority of the tours included some butchered history lesson of sorts, but over the years, Loki had gotten quite good at listening without actually hearing anything that Thor had to say. Not that what he had to say was of much importance anyway. Too often their forced conversations consisted of stories about his trainings or the various adventures that Thor and his friends-- the Warriors Three and the Lady Sif-- had gotten into.

The latter of the two were always accompanied by gifts from Thor. A comb from the horns of a bilge snipe that Thor and his friends hunted on in the outskirts of the East Valley. A wrap made from the pelt of a snow fox that Thor had killed on an expedition to Midgard. Rings of ivory from the tusks of some sort of giant boar that had been terrorizing the outer villages. Once or twice there had been other jewelry forged from the dwarf smiths of Nidavellir. Though the gestures could be sweet, Loki’s heart was too hardened to accept them as tokens of genuine affection. Each gift that Thor brought to him just served as a reminder of his imprisonment. The golden prince of Asgard was allowed to travel far and wide to collect these little treasures, while Loki was forced to play the dutiful would-be consort, awaiting patiently for his betrothed to return.

Even worse, with each gift that Thor bestowed upon him, Thor would demand a payment in return. The first payment had been for the damned pendant Thor placed around his neck in front of the
citizens of Asgard, the one he could never remove. As payment for such a fine gift, Thor demanded a kiss in return. When Loki refused, the prince had gripped his wrist tight enough to leave marks for days, pulled Loki to his chest and took his kiss anyway. Loki’s first kiss had left him bruised, his lips swollen, and with a reminder that he should remember his proper place.

Loki had confided to Hulda about Thor stealing his first kiss, but his nurse just gave him a sad look and told him not to provoke the prince. After that, Loki never confided any secrets to her again.

For each gift he was given, the payments increased. One demanded kiss became two. Two became three. Three began with Thor forcing his tongue into Loki’s mouth. This then led to agonizing minutes where Loki was shoved into a shadowy corner while the prince devoured his mouth like a man possessed. Kisses led to attempts of Thor getting his hands beneath Loki’s tunic or skirts. It was only during these attempted molestations that their chaperone would step in before Thor could ravish the boy completely. Loki often wondered why their chaperones let matters between them escalate to that point, but one servant simply told him that as long as Thor did not go completely against Odin’s orders, then they could not deny the prince his wishes.

Once, and only once, Loki attempted to use his seidr to protect himself from Thor when he demanded payment for a gift. Loki tried to call upon his new skill of forming daggers of ice to force Thor off of him. When he tried, though, the pendent around his neck burned white hot, searing his flesh and he had doubled over from the pain.

Thor had simply laughed and said, “Father thought that someday you might try one of your little ergi tricks. So long as you wear this,” he fingered the pendant around his neck, “none of your tricks can harm me. You need to learn your place, Loki.”

So Loki bid his time until he could find another way to resist Thor. As luck would have it, he did not have to wait long for a solution. After Thor had grown tired of simply guiding Loki around the palace and its surrounding grounds, he took to having Loki accompany him to his sparring matches between he and his friends. Loki became acquainted with the Warriors Three: Hogun, a silent, grim youth who hailed from Vanaheim. Volstagg, a large, boisterous man whose love of fighting was only overshadowed by his love of food. Fandral, the handsome young man who thought himself to be the gods gift to the maidens. At first, Thor had wanted his betrothed to become acquainted with the three who would become his most trusted advisors when he ascended the throne, but a lingering kiss on his knuckles from Fandral and a flirtatious smile on Loki’s part saved him from that torture.

Instead, Loki was forced to sit back and watch as Thor and his friends contested each other in feats of strength and weaponry. Even Loki had to admit that Thor was impressive and near unstoppable with his hammer. If ruling a kingdom relied solely on battle prowess, then there was no doubt that Thor would be the correct choice for the throne As it was, though, this seemed to be the only place where the golden prince truly shined. However, that wasn’t what interested Loki. What gave Loki the leverage he needed was the interaction between Thor and his friend, the Lady Sif.

The golden haired girl was a bit of an oddity to Loki at first. She was a beautiful maiden, but she refused to be set into the roles that were assigned to the other maidens of the court. Instead of being forced to wear gowns like Nanna, Sigyn, and Loki, Sif was often wore male breeches, tunics, and boots. She seemed the most comfortable when she was in her leather armor, wielding her short sword or spear. It didn’t seem fair to Loki. He was of both sexes, but forced into the role of the simpering maiden while the Aesir girl was allowed to dress as a man and fight alongside the sworn shields of Asgard. However, Loki forced himself to put that jealousy aside in favor of the way she and Thor interacted with each other. He was no fool. He had seen the way that Sif had often looked at Thor with a longing in her eyes.
For some time, Loki simply hoped that Thor would return the girl’s affections and force the Allfather to break their engagement. While he did notice a few lingering touches and a look of lust towards the shield-maiden, Loki never saw him act upon those desires. If anything, Thor seemed to respect the woman too much for her strength to act upon any base desires. It wasn’t exactly what Loki was hoping for, but it had given him an idea.

With tears spilling from his eyes, he told Frigga of Thor and Sif’s interactions. He claimed that he knew Thor would never betray his oath to him, but he could not help feeling the seeds of jealousy begin to grow at seeing how the two seemed to have a deeper connection based on respect of strength. He pleaded with Frigga for the chance to prove that he could be as strong as the shield-maiden, that he could be an intelligent and strong wife like Frigga. Though the queen was weary of his intentions, she allowed Loki the chance to practice with strength and arms. After all, the Aesir prided themselves on their strength. It would do no good if the future queen of Asgard was nothing more than a simpering maid.

Freyja surprised him once again when during their seidr lessons she pulled out two spears. As it turned out, in addition to being a powerful seidkonur, Freyja was a formidable shield-maiden and leader of the Valkyries. Loki knew he was in love with her then.

Loki was never allowed to practice with sword, hammer, mace, or axe, so he never gained the great strength that Thor and his friends possessed, but he did thrive in his lessons of spear and knives. These were considered women’s weapons as well, but Loki found that there was a certain cunning to them. Much like his seidr, the spear and the knives required patience to master and precision to wield. With the spear, one could keep their enemy at a good distance while at the same time incapacitating them with a direct hit to a vulnerable area. With the knives, each hit must be exact or else the warrior would lose their weapon and possibly their life. Once, Thor had walked in on the two as they were at their practice. Before he was even through the door, Loki had thrown one of his knives so that it embedded in the wooden frame next to the prince’s head. Loki apologized profusely and claimed it was an accident. Loki never felt so happy as when Freyja praised him for his marksmanship afterwards.

Loki’s affection for Freyja led him to be less careful under the watchful eyes of his chaperones and Heimdall. Too often someone would clear their throats if he hugged Freyja too tightly or smiled too brightly when she came into the room. Hulda scolded him when he would occasionally bring Freyja gifts as a token of his gratitude, saying that they could be interpreted the wrong way. The goddess herself always smiled good naturedly at Loki and filled him with a sense of warmth. Loki would do anything for that smile.

So one evening, when he arrived for their lessons and found Freyja in tears, Loki was immediately worried. It took some time to coax the story from her, but eventually she told Loki the cause of her distress. Three months prior, Asgard had hired a builder to construct a wall to protect them from their foes. As a payment for his services, the builder demanded the sun, the moon, and Freyja. Odin accepted the terms on the grounds that the builder complete his work on a set date. That date was only two days away and the work would be completed by the next morning.

Furious at the king for doing this to her, for attempting to control the fate of someone he loved, Loki rushed from the room, determined to save her. He ran from his chaperones and guards, out of the palace and into the fields of Asgard. He felt Heimdall’s gaze on him, but no one attempted to put a stop to his actions. Loki ran until he came upon where the builder was working and saw that the man was working with a giant, powerful steed. It was the because of the steed that the builder was able to complete so much of his work. Without even thinking of the consequences, Loki transformed himself into a mare and lured the beast away from its master. Loki took the creature on a two day chase before he transformed back into himself and returned to the palace. When he
returned he had expected to be met with admonishment for his actions, but everyone, even Odin, seemed pleased by what he had done. Loki’s distraction of the steed caused the builder to forfeit his payment.

When Thor found him, he gave Loki the first genuine smile he’d ever received from the prince and pulled him into an embrace. Loki put up with it because it was expected of him, but Thor kissed him with a vigor he’d never had before and praised Loki for his cleverness. The council agreed and praised Thor’s betrothed for proving his worth as future queen of Asgard.

When he asked about the builder, though, Loki was given a horrifying revelation. The builder had been a Frost Giant. Using a disguise, he meant to steal from Asgard and take one of the Aesir’s highborn; he was slain for his boldness. As it turned out, it was Prince Thor’s idea to allow the builder to use his great steed, not seeing the harm in the kindness until it was too late. Throughout his construction of the wall, the council had been looking for a way to get their wall and keep what was owed to the builder. Loki was conflicted then. When they explained the terms of the builder’s agreement with Asgard, it seemed like the Jotun had fairly abided by the rules of their agreement and was rightly owed his payments.

By tricking his steed, Loki had orchestrated the death of a member of his own kind and assisted the Aesir in robbing a worker from his payment. But if he hadn’t done it, Freyja would have been taken from him.

Hulda showered him in more praises that night as they made their way to his lesson. She told Loki that he had truly proven himself that day, and that the people would love him for his cleverness. Loki cared nothing for the people’s love. When he opened the chamber doors and saw Freyja standing there with joyful tears in her eyes, Loki let all of his concerns and doubt wash away. The builder didn’t matter, the Aesir council didn’t matter, and Thor’s sudden display of affection most certainly didn’t matter. Freyja was there, she hadn’t been taken away. That was all that was important to Loki. Forgetting about Hulda’s presence, he threw himself into Freyja’s arms and wept tears of joy with her.

That night Loki received his first consensual kiss. The next morning, Freyja was gone. She had been sent away to Vanaheim to become the consort of Od. Loki would never see her again.

The years without Freyja were some of the loneliest that Loki had ever known in his life. It wasn’t fair that his one companion was taken away from him so abruptly without even the chance to say goodbye. Frigga had offered to give him another tutor for his training, but he refused. What was the point of growing attached to anyone again if they were just going to be taken from him in the end? Eventually, his loneliness gave way to anger. Without a proper way to vent his frustrations, Loki threw himself into his studies. He found comfort in the ancient texts of spell works and military tactics. There was one spell in particular concerning doppelgangers that had caught his attention, but he was having difficulty mastering it without assistance.

Often Hulda would have to drag him away from the tome he was hunched over, only to be met with Loki’s scorn. He was angrier with her than even the Allfather. She could drone on and on about her duties to Asgard all she liked, but Loki would never forgive her betrayal. So she would have to take his silence and the cold glares he would shoot her and realize that Loki was not her trusting baby anymore. Eventually, Loki would forget why he had ever loved the woman in the first place.

Sometimes Loki was able to let his frustrations out on Thor. The prince still tried to crowd him against a wall and demand a kiss when the two were alone, save for their silent chaperone. From his lessons with the spear, though, Loki had grown quite good at learning how to keep Thor at a
distance when defending himself. Thor often took this as a good-natured challenge and took delight in these little “sparring sessions.”

In trying to defend himself, Loki grew more skilled at hand-to-hand defense, but the unfortunate truth was that Thor was always stronger than he was. Unbeknownst to Loki, was that in fighting with the prince, he was playing into the man’s fantasies. While he did demand for Loki to know his place, he also loved the thrill of the challenge that the younger man provided him. Having a bride that would obey his every command without question would be convenient, but Thor felt that it would become a boring affair after a while. Loki was the perfect solution to that problem. He was trained to be Thor’s ideal bride while at the same time holding on to a fighting spirit that got the prince’s blood boiling. Thor was a dominator, it seemed. As long as Loki could get in a few punches he would learn to accept it.

Years passed before Loki found a more constructive way to vent his anger and irritation.

It began when rumors spread around the court that there were new creatures appearing to the mortals of Midgard. The talk was that these creatures were a powerful race with great seidr and strength, and massive amounts of mortals had begun worshipping them as gods. Odin’s initial fear was that somehow the Jotnar had infiltrated Midgard again and were attempting to pull the mortals over to their favor. However, inspection of the realm showed that the mortals’ depiction of these creatures were similar to the mortals of the Mediterranean lands that the Allfather neglected in his visits to Midgard. As these new creatures gained more followers, the king grew nervous and began collecting any information he could about these pretenders.

Over time, communication was established with this new race and negotiations were set up. From what Loki could learn, this new race came from a sort of pocket-dimension, similar to Asgard, that was hidden in the abyss surrounding Midgard. From there, these creatures had their own forms of travel like the Bifrost where they would travel between the realms and walk amongst the mortals of Midgard. Sensing a potential threat, Odin created a portal that would bridge the gap between Asgard and the home of this race, Olympus. Odin cordially invited the rulers of this new realm into Asgard so a proper treaty could be drawn up between the two races. Though if Loki had to guess, the Allfather wanted to gauge this new race to see what sort of threat they posed to his claim on Midgard.

Loki was amongst the crowd of Asgard as these newcomers marched into the throne room and before Hlidskjaf. Loki marveled at the similarity of between the Aesir and these so-called Olympians. Their king, introduced as Zeus, lead the small procession of six before the Allfather. The king of the Olympians was similar to Odin, in strength and aged appearance, but whereas Odin’s expression always remained a stoic seriousness, this new king possessed a bright smile and laugh lines that creased his skin.

With the king were two olive skinned maidens, a light haired man just slightly older than Thor, an older man with wild, unruly hair carrying a trident, and a handsome youth similar to Loki’s age wearing a short robe and the most peculiar pair of footwear Loki had ever seen. All were introduced before the court and public of Asgard. Zeus’s bride, Hera, looked coldly out among the audience with her arms crossed in annoyance. The other woman was the more intriguing to Loki. She stood a head above the men in their procession with her great helm. In her hands she carried a spear and a shield, while on her left shoulder a small owl perched. So this Olympus had their own shield-maidens then? From the looks of how the men in their company deferred to her, these shield-maidens commanded more power and respect than those Loki knew of in Asgard. Loki would have liked to speak more with her as she reminded him of his lady Freyja, but after their introductions, the Olympians were led out by the Allfather to meet with the Aesir high council.
At the feast that night to celebrate their visitors, Loki was forced to sit at Thor’s side and act as the dutiful consort. Thor took the seat at the head of his table, his father’s seat, as the two kings were absent from the festivities. One too many cups of mead had Thor’s hand running up Loki’s skirt mid-way into the feast and Loki excused himself out into the courtyard for fresh air. He was followed by two members of the Einherjar, but they were kind enough not to let him alone to his thoughts. The courtyard was shrouded in the darkness of the evening, so it was simple enough for Loki to render himself invisible to the guards’ sight. They made no fuss over it, for even though they could not see him, Loki was always being watched.

It was as he was walking alone through the courtyard that he heard a light voice whispering in his ear.

“Don’t let my father catch sight of you here wandering alone. Hera will not take kindly to him bringing home another concubine. She is still fuming over Ganymede.”

Loki whipped around to see who was speaking to him, but no one was there.

“Though I must say, no one would blame him if he did snatch up one as lovely as you.”

Again, Loki turned to find the voice, but no one was there. He felt that he had finally lost his mind when he felt a finger lightly tapping on his skull. Looking up, Loki found a young man hovering over him with a mischievous smile.

“How are you doing that?”

“Doing what?”

“Flying?” Loki asked, circling around the hovering young man. “What sort of magic allows you to do that without transforming yourself into another creature?”

“No magic involved, lovely boy.” The young man lowered himself back down to the ground to stand before Loki. He gave the prince a small bow, before rising again and pointing down towards his feet. Loki’s eyes followed and saw that the young man’s peculiar shoes contained a pair of fluttering wings at the ankles.

“I am Hermes, messenger of the Olympians. These sandals ensure that I travel swiftly, carry out my father’s commands, and—”

“—sneak up on others in the dead of night?”

“That is an added bonus, yes,” he laughed. “What good is having unlimited power if you can’t abuse it once in a while?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Loki smiled sadly. “What little power I had, I was forced to fight for. If I went about abusing it, then Odin would not hesitate in taking it away.”

“Ah yes, your wise king,” he laughed. “He seems a bit tense. Perhaps he would do well to loosen up, turn himself into a cow and mingle about with the mortals.”

“As amusing as the notion would be, I doubt that the Aesir would take kindly to their ruler taking sabbaticals to debase himself with the humans of Midgard.”

“True. From what I’ve seen of your people they seem to greatly favor combat when they’re not
drowning themselves in your strange alcohol. Someone needs to pull the spear from their assess.”

“They are *not* my people,” Loki growled. “They will never be my people!”

Hermes was stunned by Loki’s outburst at first, but after a moment he laughed. “Then why should you care about what they think?”

“I don’t!” He snapped. “You wouldn’t understand… Everywhere I go, these people watch me, judging everything that I do and reporting my every movement back to the Allfather.”

“Surely you jest. You were alone just now.”

“Only because those fools don’t possess the seidr to see me when I choose not to be seen. Even still, the gatekeeper keeps his eyes upon me.”

“That was another thing that made me curious. You talk about your--what was it called? Seidr? You speak as if it was some form of anomaly.”

“Because it is, at least in Asgard. It’s considered a coward’s weapon, and marks a person as an ergi.”

“And an ergi is?”

“Basically a submissive, unmanly person. It is considered a great insult among these people.”

“Don’t let my father hear about it then,” he laughed. Loki was surprised to find that he quite liked Hermes’s laugh. “He does not like having his manhood questioned.”

“Why should it be?”

“Well, magic comes naturally to the Olympians. From the moment my mother put me in my cradle I had the power shift my appearance and bend mortals to my will. My uncle, Poseidon, has control over the natural elements of water and horse, for some reason. My sister, Athena, was swallowed by our father shortly after her birth, but she was somehow still able to grow into the warrior you saw before my brother Hephaestus had to split open Zeus’s skull to cut her out.”

“…What?”

“It is a bit hard to follow, isn’t it?”

“Just a bit, yes.”

“Living with the Olympians can be a bit hectic, I will admit. To tell the truth half of them are either self-righteous twits or lustful drunkards. They constantly fight amongst themselves. Hera tries to kill Zeus’s mistress of the week. Ares thinks more with his sword than his head. Aphrodite would open her legs to anyone who looked at her twice. It’s all enough to make me want to destroy them all.”

“I can sympathize,” he laughed. “And yet you seem fairly sane. How do you cope?”

“I’ve found that some well placed mischief from time to time helps me to keep my mind intact. As I said before, it is no good having unlimited power if you can’t abuse it from time to time.”

“Mischief?” Loki repeated. A slow smile crept upon his lips. “Tell me more.”
Hours passed as the two sat together in the courtyard, Hermes regaling Loki with tales of his mischievous pranks against both the Olympians and the mortals of Midgard. It amazed Loki how relaxed he was in the other man’s company, how free he felt. It was a feeling he only experienced before in his lessons with Freyja. Instead of showing him how to change himself, though, Hermes just sat with Loki, listening to the boy and telling one bawdy tale after another. And Loki laughed. He laughed hard and earnestly, and for the first time since Freyja was taken away it felt like Loki had a friend.

“--so Apollo is standing over me, his face as red as an apple with steam practically coming out of his ears. Through clenched teeth he just demands to know what I had done with his cattle.”

“And what did you say?”

“Cattle? What are cattle? I have not seen or heard of them, for I was born yesterday. But I swear by my father that I am innocent and have not seen who stole your cows-- whatever cows may be. I only know of them by hearsay.”

“By the Norns!” Loki laughed loudly. “Did that actually work?”

“Oh no,” Hermes answered, shaking his head. “Would you believe a talking one-day old baby? He lifted my swaddled ass out of the cradle and took me before Zeus. Unfortunately for me, my skills of lies were not so great as they are now.”

“Were you punished?”

“If it were up to Apollo my head would have been dashed against a rock. Hera probably felt the same, but my stepmother never got along greatly with my father’s bastards… She never really got on with their own sons for that matter. As for Zeus, well he just looked tired when the whole thing was explained. He made me take Apollo back to his cows, but I had already killed two of them.”

“That must have made Apollo upset.”

“Furious,” he nodded, “but to calm him down I gave him a lute that I made from a tortoise. He was so happy with the damned thing that he swore to always be my ally, provided that I never stole from him again.”

“Something tells me that didn’t stop you,” Loki smirked knowingly.

“Not at all,” he smirked. “Just last week I slept with his mistress Khione. She may be carrying my bastard as we speak.”

“You are terrible!” Loki laughed. “How is it that you could do all of this and still have such high ranking amongst your kind?”

Hermes shrugged. “As I said before, the mischief must be well placed. If I were to go around wildly stealing from the other Olympians, I would find myself thrown out to the mortals. So as long as I keep my tricks limited, and someone else could potentially benefit, I am allowed to do as I please.”

“If only it were that simple here,” Loki sighed wistfully.

“You think it was simple stealing a heard of cattle after literally just learning to walk? No, lovely boy, it only appears simple if you’ve done it correctly. From what you’ve told me you have a natural power that many of the others here do not possess. It wouldn’t be too hard to pull the wool over their eyes and have some fun.”
“No… No it wouldn’t,” Loki smiled.

“Lovely Loki,” Hermes sighed, “your smile is more blinding than the mortals’ sun. You should do it more often.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have much occasion to smile while being trapped inside this gilded cage.”

“So your smiles are among the rarest jewels in Asgard? You’ve no idea how much it pleases me to know that I was able to place that lovely expression on your face.”

Hermes moved to place his hand over Loki’s. The prince flinched at the sudden contact at first, but Hermes gently pulled him back. The Olympian’s hand was much different than Thor’s. The Aesir’s giant hand was rough and calloused from the countless hours he spent training and sparring. They often left abrasions on Loki’s smooth flesh. Hermes, though, had soft, supple fingers that softly stroked Loki’s palm. The messenger smiled at him, and for once in the evening it wasn’t that self-assured smirk that the prince had become acquainted with. Rather, the smile was almost shy, and Loki swore he saw a blush appear on his olive skin.

Before Loki could interpret what it meant, though, the pair were interrupted by a loud cry accompanied by the clap of thunder. “Loki!”

Loki pulled himself up and away from Hermes. When he turned, he saw Thor behind them in the courtyard, staggering drunk and with a furious expression. The prince was looking in all directions, but as Loki’s charm still held, he lacked the ability to see him.

“That would be your betrothed?” Hermes whispered in his ear. “We didn’t get a chance to become properly acquainted before, though I can’t say I mind.”

“That would be Asgard’s golden prince, yes. You had best be away.”

“Will you be alright?”

“It will be worse if he were to find you here. I will be fine.”

“Be well until we meet again, lovely Loki.”

With those parting words, Hermes flew away with his winged sandals, so fast that Loki’s hair blew in the gust he caused. Thor was still shouting his name and searching for him as the sound of thunder grew louder in the distance. Loki mentally prepared himself before he dropped his illusion and allowed himself to be revealed to Thor. When the golden prince caught sight of him, the thunder clapped so loud that Loki’s ears began to ring. He had never seen Thor this angry before, but he wasn’t afraid.

“Where have you been!??” Thor was on him in a moment, gripping his arms painfully and shouting in his face.

Loki attempted to pull away from Thor, but the prince’s grip was like iron fetters. “I have been here,” Loki growled. “Where I told you hours ago that I would be.”

“The Einherjar haven’t seen you all night. They said that you slipped away the moment you came out here. What have you been doing all this time?”

“Relax, you drunkard. Your gate-keeper has had his eye upon me. Why do you care what I have been up to?”
Thor’s brows furrowed together in anger, his face growing a darker shade of red. “Father’s negotiations with the Olympians has ended. I was berated for not having you by my side--where you should be--at the feast. You’re not even properly chaperoned! Do you have any idea what my father will do when he finds out?”

“Be angry, I suppose,” Loki shrugged. “I care not that your father scolded you, Thor. Perhaps if he had done so more often, your temperament might have been vastly improved and the rest of us might not have been made to suffer for it.”

In the blink of an eye, Thor’s large hand was around Loki’s slender throat, squeezing tightly. Loki’s first reaction was to claw at the appendage, but his efforts just made Thor grip harder, crushing the smaller man’s windpipe. Lighting filled the air above them, flashing just enough so that Loki could glimpse Thor’s face. Beforehand, in all of their scuffles together, Thor would typically be wearing a satisfied smile, pleased with himself for getting a challenge out of Loki. Now, though, his expression was only that of rage and the glint of something unrecognizable in his blue eyes.

Loki’s mouth opened as his body desperately gasped for air. It was only when he felt his body begin to go limp that Thor released him, dropping his dead weight down to the ground. Loki let out strangled coughs as his body greedily took in as much air as it could, despite how much it hurt to do so.

“You are the most frustrating creature, Loki,” he heard Thor say above him. “You beg and plead with my parents for a chance to prove yourself worthy as my wife, but you refuse to obey me. Though I appreciate the fight you give to entice me, your constant attitude contradicts your actions… I do not understand you. You saved me from my father’s wrath when the builder tried to cheat in his wager, but then you humiliate me as we host for this treaty.”

_The incident with the builder wasn’t about you. I would never do you that kindness! It was what Loki would have said if he could form the words in his wounded throat. As it was, though, he was stuck gasping like a fish as Thor ranted._

“You are to be my queen, Loki. You belong to me. That is all. That is your only purpose here in Asgard. It is the only reason my father didn’t leave you to die on that waste of a realm with those monsters who birthed you.” Thor reached down and grabbed Loki’s wrist, pulling him up to his feet.

“That is your place, Loki. **Beneath** me.”

As Thor’s fingers dug into his skin and he felt his bones crushing together, Loki allowed the words to sink in. All of his life Odin had been telling him about his purpose. Everyone else seemed so set on keeping Loki in what they viewed was his rightful place-- which seemed to be the rightful place of all the Jotnar; beneath Asgard. He was expected to lick the mud from the heel of Thor’s boot and be grateful for the opportunity.

A rage came over Loki then. An intense anger combined with the thoughts of all of the slights that Thor and his family had ever caused him; his isolation, the forced societal role, Thor’s fondling, the constant xenophobia, Freyja… All of these thoughts collected together in his mind and added fuel to the intense burn of his ire. Something broke inside of Loki in that moment and before he could even realize what he had done, Thor screamed in pain and released his arm.

The prince cradled his wounded hand to his chest and stared at the younger man in disbelief, eyeing the pendant around his neck suspiciously. Loki saw that Thor’s fingers and palms were black, as if he had suffered a terrible frost bite. With wide eyes, Loki looked down at his own arm.
and saw that his smooth white skin had been replaced by flesh that was cobalt blue with raised lines running along his arms.

“How… The pendent… How did you…” Thor couldn’t form the words to his question, but it didn’t matter. Loki doubted if he could answer him.

When he had tried to defend himself from Thor with his seidr, the pendent had prevented him. This time, though, Loki hadn’t even called his magic to him. He hadn’t done anything at all. As his anger gave way to confusion, the blue of his skin receded and faded back into the pale white he had always known. By that time, the Einherjar had heard Thor’s cries and came to assist. They took Thor to have his wound inspected by Eir while Loki was escorted back into his room.

That night, as Hulda took in the bruises that covered Loki’s neck she didn’t give him any long-winded speeches about not provoking the prince to anger. She simply stayed quiet and saw to his injuries, and for that, Loki was grateful.

As Loki lay in his bed that night, his eyes kept running over his arm as his fingers traced the marks of where the lines on his skin once were. His arms hurt to touch and he could not even begin to understand how he had managed to break the illusion that held his body trapped inside the Aesir flesh… but he swore that he would find a way to do it again. He would find a way to break free. Only one obstacle truly remained.

“Heimdall,” Loki whispered into the darkness of his room. “Gate-keeper, I know that you’re listening. You have always been listening; ever since the day the Allfather brought me to this golden realm, you have had your eye on me, as Odin commanded you. I know you saw what Thor did this night, and what I must have done to protect myself… Son of nine mothers, you understand what it is like to be taken from your home and bound to the service of Asgard. I beg of you know, Heimdall, please… please just grant me freedom in this time that I have left. When Thor ascends the throne, I will be bound to him completely, in body and spirit. Heimdall, I swear that I will not cause bodily harm to Thor or his family and I will stay bound to my betrothal. All I ask is that you let the precious time that I have left be mine. Please, Heimdall, allow me to have some freedom before it is all taken away completely.”

Time passed slowly as Loki waited for some kind of answer. He had nearly given up when finally, he felt something new, something that he had never felt before in all of his years in Asgard. It was a feeling of lightness, as if some great yoke had been lifted from his shoulders and he knew then that Heimdall’s eyes had turned away. That night, Loki knew no better sleep.

For harming Thor, Loki was bound to his chambers for four months time while he was constantly interrogated by his tutors-- and subtly asked by Hulda--how he managed to break the Allfather’s illusion, no matter how momentary it was. Loki answered honestly that he did not know what he had done and his captors added more time to his sentence. It didn’t matter to him, though. For once, Loki was not being watched and this allowed him the time he needed to carefully plan out his actions for the court. After all, he had taken Hermes’s words to heart; mischief and tricks would seem simple if done correctly.

Chapter End Notes

Ugh, I had a hard time with this one and I'm still not completely satisfied with it. Hopefully things don't seem slow or drawn out. Also, I had to take some liberties with
the earthly timelines to make the Greek deities work in this story. Hopefully you guys will like it. :)
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Months of confining Loki to his chambers gave no one answers as to how he broke the Allfather’s illusion. Eventually, everyone involved was ready to write the incident off as a fluke, and Loki was happy to oblige. As happy as he was to have the time to himself to prepare, he did miss hearing the sound of other people’s voices and walking about the gardens at night. After being alone and isolated so long, Loki learned to have an almost sacred appreciation of the cool night air on his skin. So the day Hulda told him he was allowed to leave his rooms again, he graced the woman with a blinding smile.

In his solitude, Loki thought of the subtle ways that he could express his frustration without calling too much attention to himself. The first incident occurred when he was forced back into the ladies sewing circle. To his surprise, the ladies had missed him, which confused Loki to no end as he never partook in their idle gossip. But Sigyn was the first to embrace him upon his return and inform him of all that he had missed. There was a face among the ladies that Loki had not recognized before; the Lady Amora. Sigyn informed Loki that she and her family were new among the ranks of Aesir nobles, with aspirations of climbing the social ladder.

Loki would have been content to place this information at the back of his mind, but Amora proved to be an insufferable creature. She carried herself with a very undeserved sense of superiority and often talked down to the other women, particularly Nanna and Sigyn. While Loki held no affection for the two, he did not have anything against them either. What really pushed him over the edge, though, was her constant talk of “those ghastly Frost Giants” and her disbelief of how “one so kind and handsome as our Prince Thor could even bear to be in the same room as one of those beasts.”

Still, Loki managed to feign shock when Amora ran screaming from the room claiming that there were spiders crawling all over her body. She was not invited back into the ladies sewing room.

From that point, Loki managed to find ways to subtly plant a little chaos into everyday court life. If someone at a feast became too lewd in their jokes of the “runt” they would find the meat in their mouths had turned rancid and rotten. When others commented on how well mannered and fair he was “for a Frost Giant” then those people would find themselves waking with boils and blisters on their skin. If Loki was just bored, then it was no trouble to conjure the image of snakes or scorpions to frighten the servants and occasional high-born. After a while, there was talk of a plague of pests infesting Asgard, though no one could ever find these vermin.

For a while, Loki kept his tricks small and passable as oddities or coincidences that could not have been tied back to him. While these acts did make Loki smile, he found himself greedy for more.

As it happened, his opportunity arose one evening when he was dragged to the arena to watch Thor spar with his friends and several other warriors. Since the incident in the courtyard, Thor had not tried to corner him or touch him inappropriately. The prince was still cordial to him in public, but he watched Loki now with suspicious eyes, as if trying to puzzle out how Loki had managed to harm him, something that the boy didn’t even know himself. Despite the lack of force, though, Thor still seemed to like having Loki in his company, particularly when he had the opportunity to show off in front of his friends. He was still treating Loki like a possession, but now it was more of a prize; something that he had that his friends never would.

Loki alternated from reading the tome in his lap-- he was still trying his damndest to perfect the
doppelganger illusion-- to watching as Thor whacked at large Volstagg with his hammer. If it was one thing that Loki noticed about Thor’s technique, it was that Thor handled combat the way he handled any other situation: without thought or subtlety. He was quick and agile enough, which helped in his combats with foes like Fandral and Volstagg, but they fought in a similar manner, rushing head-first into the fight with the hope that their blow struck first. Loki took note of this, wondering what it would be like if he were to join Thor in the arena with a spear. It would infuriate the prince, no doubt. He wouldn’t take kindly to an opponent who would not rush to meet him, but would prefer to dance around him and wait for him to tire himself out. The thought was almost enough for Loki to pick up his practice spear and test the theory out… Almost. It would be best not to show Thor all he was capable of yet.

Instead, Loki watched with feigned amusement as Thor struck a harsh blow to Volstagg’s torso, knocking the larger man to the ground. Volstagg gave a shuddering laugh and yielded while Thor smiled and helped him stand. The prince raised his arm in victory, shot a grin in Loki’s direction and called for the next challenger. The person who stepped into the ring was a tall man with a considerable amount of bulk that indicated his strength, if the bulging arms and vambraces being cut off by his were anything to go by. His long dark hair was parted down the middle and hung in loose plaits below his shoulders. His eyes were narrowed and jaw clenched as he approached the golden prince, bearing his longsword. Loki recognized him as Tyr, the son of one of Odin’s council members who was being groomed for the position as head of the Einherjar. The two men circled each other for a moment before they began their attack. Loki rolled his eyes and left them to it.

He was content to resume his reading, but the sound of fawning kept invading his ears and breaking his concentration. Loki looked to his left and saw that Amora and her sister, Lorelei, had come to watch the warriors paw at each other. If Loki remembered his gossip correctly, then Amora was betrothed to Tyr, a sensible match for someone so new to the nobility.

“Look at the way he moves, sister,” Amora sighed wistfully. “He has so much power, but remains so graceful.”

Loki looked in the other direction and only saw that Tyr and Thor had their weapons locked together, pushing at one another to get the other off.

“He does.” Lorelei nodded obediently. “Perhaps it is because he wears your favor? I’ve read stories where warriors in battle were greatly empowered by their beloved’s favors.”

“Not Tyr, you dolt,” she hissed at her sister. “Prince Thor. He’s so beautiful and strong. Tyr doesn’t stand a chance against him.”

From what Loki saw, Tyr was doing quite well for himself in their combat. Thor had gone against four opponents beforehand, so his stamina was mostly drained. Even so, Tyr moved with a sense of calmness in his attacks. Where Thor was wildly swinging his hammer, Tyr managed to block with his sword until he saw his perfect opening. If Loki were a gambler, his money would have been on Tyr coming away victorious in this fight. He almost wished it, if anything just to bring the prince down a peg or two.

“Sister, you shouldn’t say such things so loudly,” he heard Lorelei whisper. Loki didn’t have to look to know she was casting glances in his direction.

“The foundling can’t hear me,” Amora hissed. “Even so, I care not. The Allfather must be losing his sense in his age if he thinks that that runt could ever be worthy of Prince Thor. Sure, he hides it in an illusion, but underneath that skin is just another monstrosity. And some day we’ll have to be in service to it! Where is the justice in that, sister?”
Loki could have easily had the girl’s head off for such a comment. It would have been extremely simple too. Amora had made no friends among the ladies of the court, and word of her undeserved attitude was already common knowledge. All Loki had to do was say the word…but that would be too easy. He wanted to have fun.

When he looked back to Thor and Tyr, he saw that the prince was growing tired too soon in his fight. His chest was heaving as he fought for breath while Tyr stood over him with a frighteningly calm expression. Tyr’s arm was raised, ready to strike a blow at Thor that Loki knew he would not be quick enough to block. Loki widened his eyes in shock and raised his hand as if to cover a gasp. It gave him the cover he needed to whisper the words that would conjure just enough ice beneath Tyr’s heel to avoid being seen. When he moved to deliver his blow, his foot slipped. He didn’t fall over, but he stumbled, and it gave Thor just enough time to pounce on him. He tackled Tyr around the middle and brought the larger man down. The two grappled on the ground for several minutes before Thor was finally able to knock away the long-sword and place his elbow into Tyr’s throat. Grudgingly, Tyr admitted defeat.

Every onlooker applauded the prince as he rose to his feet and lifted his arms in victory. Loki made sure to include his voice in the praise, he even made to run to the side of the arena, as if running into his beloved’s arms. Thor saw the movement and was frozen in confusion, but his pause gave Lady Sif enough time to crash into his side with a friendly hug. Though, as always, the look in her eyes suggested something more than mere comradery. The woman was so predictable that it hurt. Thor responded as Loki had hoped, forgetting about him and returning Sif’s hug.

He forced the tears to well in his eyes before he turned back to his seat. From the corner of his eyes, he saw Amora and Lorelei watching him closely. No doubt they were also curious about Sif and Thor’s friendly nature. Loki didn’t want to disappoint them, so he feigned wiping away tears and said loudly enough for them to hear, “He will always prefer her!” before he gathered up his tome and left the arena.

Loki’s plan worked perfectly. The jealousy of Sif that he pretended all those years ago was passed along to Amora. She saw that Loki wasn’t the threat to her imagined claim on Thor, but rather it was Sif. Their companies didn’t often mix, but on the occasions that they occupied the same space, Amora always managed to loudly comment on Sif’s “mannish gait”, her “awkward social graces”, or her “horribly plain features.” None of these things were true, of course, but they did the trick in angering Sif to the point where she had tried to attack Amora, only to be pulled apart by Thor or Hogun.

When they were not in each other’s company, Amora took to spreading wicked rumors about Lady Sif. Because of her, half of the court began to think that Sif shared the same insatiable lust as her shield-brothers-- a horrid double standard, Loki thought. Through Amora’s gossip, testimonies came forward that Sif had spread her legs for the entire Einherjar and half of the tavern residents in Asgard. The more that these accusations came forward, though, the more that Thor and their friends would defend her honor, which only served to make Amora angrier and double her efforts.

Within a few months, Loki had all of the ammunition he needed to complete the final part of his plan. Having long ago perfected his charm of invisibility and no longer having Heimdall’s eyes upon him made it far too easy to sneak himself into Sif’s chambers one evening. In her sleep, Loki saw another side of Sif, a side that she hid from everyone, including Thor. He saw her in her most vulnerable, wounded state.

In her sleep, Sif slept curled in on herself like a small child, trying to protect itself from unseen foe. Her cheeks were stained with dried tears, and though her eyes were closed tight, he could tell that they were swollen from a night of crying. Loki felt a pang of sympathy for her then. He was
envious of her freedom, but he realized that it came at a cost for her. If she wanted to be a warrior, then she wasn’t allowed to show any part of her female side. She wasn’t allowed to be seen as weak at any point or shed her tears even in the company of her friends. At the same time, though, she was still bound to the prudish rules of her rank and gender. She was caught in the two worlds; the one she wanted to be a part of, and the one she was born into. She had to be everything they wanted, and nothing of her true self.

Loki didn’t hate her, truly he didn’t. In fact, in that moment, as he stood over her bed, he felt closer to her than probably her own friends. He understood her… These thoughts, however, did not stop him from picking up strands of her golden locks and shearing them off.

The next morning, Sif’s screams of terror could be heard all across the palace. Heimdall was questioned, but he had not seen the incident. By that evening, a pair of shears and clumps of Sif’s golden hair were found in Amora’s rooms. She vehemently denied having anything to do with it, but by then the whole court knew of her hatred and jealousy of Sif. Amora was deemed a liar and she was stripped of her betrothal to Tyr. Loki couldn’t have been more amused.

Still, he felt a certain sympathy towards Sif. Weeks went by without her presence at either the arena or the court feasts. Thor and the Warriors Three complained of her absence, but made passing comments on the “vanity of women.” As offensive as it was, Loki could see a certain truth to it, at least by the rules of the Aesir. He had taken away Sif’s crown, the part of her that truly made her beautiful and accepted by the fellow women of the court.

Loki’s own hair had never been cut in all of his years at the palace, and it fell in a long braid that touched his lower back. It wasn’t too much trouble to cut the braid just below his shoulders. Hulda was furious with him and when he gave it to Sif, she took it with suspicion, but said thank you all the same. When she returned to the eyes of the public, everyone told her how lovely her new onyx hair was, and Loki would sometimes catch her giving a faint smile in his direction.

The only unintentional side effect to the gesture was that his actions had given Thor the wrong idea. Loki had done a kindness for one of the prince’s friends, so Thor saw this as Loki gradually accepting Thor and his place in the prince’s life. On the night he gave Sif the hair, Thor had cornered him. Instead of forcing himself on the younger prince, though, Thor just took his hand in his own and brought it to his lips, thanking him before he moved away. That was the beginning of it.

Thor’s sudden tenderness was new, so Loki didn’t know how to process it and properly respond. When Thor gave him a kiss on the cheek and Loki didn’t fight him off, Thor would give him a grin and believe that he had won some kind of great victory. He gave Loki gifts, but instead of the common trinkets he used to give, he took to giving Loki things that would actually interest him; exotic fruits from Vanaheim, jade hilted daggers, fine tunics instead of gowns, and illuminated texts he borrowed from his father’s collections. Loki accepted these gifts gladly, but was confused when Thor didn’t demand repayment.

It was Hulda who informed him what was really going on. “I believe he’s really starting to grow fond of you,” she told him one night as she brushed out his hair.

“I doubt it.”

“It is true, Loki,” she insisted. “He’s taken quite an interest in your hobbies. There was even talk that he’s having a new spear commissioned for you.”

“What good will the spear be if he won’t give me the opportunity to use it?”
“Loki, why must you make it so difficult? He really seems to be trying now.”

But Loki didn’t want him to try. He didn’t want anything from Thor, because he knew that even if the prince was growing fond of him, it didn’t matter in the long run. Freyr had no doubt been fond of Gerd, but that didn’t make what happened to the Jotun any easier to accept. Thor hadn’t forced himself on Loki in so long because-- whether he was willing to admit it or not-- he was afraid of Loki at first. But when Loki hadn’t transformed into his true self and hurt him, Thor allowed himself to be lulled into a false sense of security, that his betrothed wouldn’t harm him again. Now that had given way to this fantasy that his Jotun bride-to-be was finally showing affection towards him. This would not do for Loki.

To make the point that Thor was still the same brute he had always been, Loki decided to have fun at his expense. There was a great feast on the night of the Alfheim ambassador’s visit to the palace. Food and mead were generously given out as the people laughed and danced in the great hall. Loki allowed himself to indulge in the mead, and when he felt his head growing light from the alcohol, he went out onto the dance floor. Thor didn’t follow, as he was too engrossed in a story with Fandral about a tavern fight and a one-eyed whore.

Dressed once more as a maiden--in a gown of fine silk and a silver diadem--Loki looked out among the gleeful dancers in the crowd. Many saw him approach, but they kept their distance from him, knowing it was not their place to ask for a dance. So Loki made the first move instead. When he saw Sigyn dancing with some unknown squire, he cut between the pair and began to lead the girl in a fast paced dance. She was shocked at first, but when she saw his mirthful smile, she began to laugh and allowed herself to be led. Loki imagined that the two made an amusing sight to the onlookers. He danced with her for two songs before he kissed her cheek and moved on to another partner. He danced with Nanna and Lorelei before he came upon a male partner who could match his movements.

Loki never got the young man’s name, not that it mattered anyway. He was just what Loki needed for his purpose. He took Loki’s hand in his own and placed his other on Loki’s back, pulling him in close as he led Loki in a slower dance. His fingers grazed Loki’s back familiarly, he whispered flattering comments in Loki’s ear, and his tipsy smile promised something more… And right on cue, he was ripped away from Loki and replaced by the fuming prince. Thor’s brows were furrowed in that familiar anger that Loki knew so well, but he didn’t act on it in front of the onlookers. He tried to lead Loki in another dance, but he had seen Thor dance before and decided to spare himself that awkwardness. Instead, Loki feigned a hurtful look and pulled out of the prince’s embrace, sprinting from the great hall.

He didn’t get far down the corridor before he heard Thor calling for him to stop. Loki kept walking and counted down the seconds until he felt Thor’s hand crushing his wrist in a painful grip.

“Where are you going?” Thor’s voice wasn’t raised, but it held a harsh tone. Loki knew that if he provoked properly, he could get the reaction he wanted.

“Away.”

“Why? Were you not enjoying yourself?”

“I was enjoying myself just fine until you decided to make an ass of yourself just now.”

“I was making an ass of myself?” He repeated. “You were the one pressed up against another man, in front of the entire damn court.”
“I was dancing, Thor,” Loki said. “Dancing often involves two bodies pressing near each other. You seemed to have no problem when I was pressed near Sigyn or Nanna.”

“Those girls were not touching you so familiarly.” Thor stepped closer into Loki’s space, a tactic he enjoyed using to intimidate the younger prince. Loki played along, letting him enjoy his moment, as he gave him his wide, frightened eyes.

“He placed his hands upon me for a dance, Thor. Nothing more.”

“He should not have placed his hands upon you at all,” Thor growled.

“Thor, please. You cannot react this way to every man who would touch me.”

“You do not tell me how to react!” He barked. “No man should be touching you at all.”

“And yet you have yet to loosen your grip, Thunderer.” Loki looked pointedly at the strong hand still holding tightly to his wrist.

“You know damn well what I meant, Loki. By the Norns, every time I get a step forward with you, you decide to take two backwards!”

“No, I understand perfectly what you meant, Thor. No man should touch me at all… So I think I will go back inside and find Sigyn.”

“You’ll do what?” Thor is fuming now. He’s backed Loki against the wall, his body so close that the breath from his flared nostrils hit’s the younger man’s cheek.

“Sigyn,” Loki repeated. “She’s a lovely girl, don’t you agree? A sweet girl, and so affectionate towards me. You saw how she smiled when I led her in the dance. A few well placed words and I’m sure that she’ll be more than willing.”

Thor shook Loki against the wall, making his head hit the cold stone behind him. “You would do well not to speak that way.”

“Why? Is the mighty prince of Asgard afraid of losing his betrothed to that waif of a girl? I cannot blame you for feeling insecure. After all, you must parade me in gowns and constantly make references to my cunt in order to feel that you are above me. Sigyn, though, she would most definitely enjoy my cock.”

“I told you to be silent,” Thor growled.

“In fact, I think I will have her over the tables in front of your father’s throne. That should give his one eyed gaze something to watch.”

“Silence!”

From down the hall, Loki could hear the sound of doors being opened and the soft fall of footsteps. The prince, however, was deaf to all sounds but his growing rage. Taking the chance, Loki leaned in to whisper in Thor’s ear, “Then all of Asgard can see how their golden prince cannot keep his Jotun bitch in its place.”

Thor reacted just as Loki had hoped. He let out a dangerous snarl before pulling his hand back to deliver a blow across Loki’s face. The back of his hand struck hard against his cheekbone. It didn’t break the skin, but as Loki fell to the floor, it wasn’t hard to conjure the illusion of blood at his temple and the look of a split lip. The footsteps he heard grew louder and quicker. Loki had to hold
back a vindictive laugh when he heard Frigga’s voice.

“Thor! What is the meaning of this!?”

From his prostrated position, Loki took an almost sadistic glee from seeing the fear creep in Thor’s eyes when he heard the anger in his mother’s voice.

“Mother, I-”

“I- I’m sorry, my prince,” Loki said in a forced sob. “I spoke out of turn. Please forgive me.”

“Loki, dear,” Frigga said calmly as she knelt down next to him. When she placed a hand on his shoulder, Loki made sure to flinch instinctively at the contact. “Are you hurt?”

Loki wiped away at the image of the blood at his lip before the queen could examine it for herself. “I… I am fine, your majesty. It is my fault.”

Frigga nodded slowly and helped Loki to his feet. When he was standing straight, head lowered submissively, Frigga turned her attention back to her son. “Just what happened here?”

“Mother, it is not my fault. He provoked me.”

“And how did he provoke you?”

“He… he embarrassed me before our guests. When I asked him about it, he said that he would rut against Sigyn.”

“Is this true, Loki?”

“I… I may have said things I did not mean,” Loki nodded. “I have had much mead this night and… I’m sorry about what I said,” he looked to Thor now, eyes shining with forced tears. “I am sorry, Thor. I shouldn’t have angered you so.”

“No,” Frigga sighed. “You shouldn’t have said such things… but you cannot control what the mead does to your head. And Thor should not have struck you so.”

“But, Mother! He said-”

“Thor, you have been known to attempt waging wars over cups of mead. Not to mention the many reparations that your father and I have had to pay because you could not control your temper while drinking. Loki spoke out of turn and now he has paid for it. It is done… Now, it would be best if you returned to your rooms. Both of you.”

“You cannot send me off like some child!”

“I can and I will!” Frigga snapped. “You may be the heir apparent, but I am still your mother. And you will listen to me. Now go! I will hear no more of this.”

Thor stood there for several moments, mouth open as if he meant to protest, but a pointed glare from Frigga silenced any of his words. Still fuming, Thor turned on his heels and strode away, the sound of thunder heard by all.

Sadly, Loki’s joy at seeing Thor scolded like the brat he is was lost when he felt Frigga’s hand tighten around his arm. He looked to the woman and saw that her anger had not subsided, but was now directed at him.
“I know not what you’re planning, Loki, but I would ask that you stop immediately.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I understand what it means to be trapped in an unwanted betrothal, and I understand that we were unfair in how this match was presented to you, but it is done. Nothing will break the Allfather’s command. Provoking Thor will not change anything.”

“I know not of what you speak, my queen.”

“I have known you since you were a babe, Loki, and I will admit that I had grown fond of you, but you are not my child. You are Thor’s betrothed and my son will always come before you. We have allowed you many freedoms, Loki. One of the only reasons I allowed for your studies and seidr is because it will help you in your duties as queen.”

“The seidr lives in me naturally, my queen. You cannot allow me to have something that was already mine.”

“Be that as it may, you silver-tongue boy, I will not have you using it against us.”

“I would not harm you, nor the Allfather or Thor,” Loki said, remembering his oath to Heimdall.

“I speak for all of Asgard, Loki. I know my son can be difficult, but I will not have you take out punishment against Asgard or her people because he displeases you.”

“Dear Frigga, if there has one thing that I’ve learned in my time here, it is that Asgard is my home. I have known no other. And as you said, I am to be queen one day. It would do no good to provoke anger from the people. Being a Frost Giant is enough reason for their contempt.”

“Your nature gives you no favors, I will grant you that. But the more you try to fight against this match, the more you will anger them.”

“So what do you suggest? That I lay back and accept my place with silence and a well placed smile?”

“…If that is what it takes, then yes,” Frigga said calmly. “You would not be the first who has had to do so, Loki, nor would you be the last. So please, do me a favor and stop acting as if you’re the only person who has ever been victimized by circumstances.”

Frigga gave Loki’s arm one last warning squeeze before she released him and moved to turn away. Loki stood there contemplating her words for a moment. Before she could completely leave him, though, he called out to her.

“Tell me this, my queen. It is said that you can see all men’s fate. Is this true?”

“…It is,” she nodded. “Though I cannot reveal it to you.”

“Just tell me; can one’s fate be changed?”

She didn’t answer him at first. For a long moment she just stood there, holding his eyes in an intense gaze. When she did finally speak, her words were like ice. “That is my hope.”

With that, she turned away and sent a guard to take Loki back to his rooms. Loki was left pondering her meaning for the rest of the evening. The next morning he apologized to Thor, as was expected of him, and life carried on as normal. Sometimes a candle would burn too brightly and
burn a tapestry against a wall; occasionally a servant or noble would be chased from their rooms claiming that it was infested by snakes or rats; and sometimes, a person was pushed down by some unseen force. She never said anything of the matter again, but Loki would catch the disapproving glance from Frigga. And he enjoyed himself all the more.

Loki continued to grow more into his powers. On top of his charm of invisibility, he became capable of teleporting himself to different areas with nothing more than a simple thought. With this newfound capability, Loki grew bolder and began taking his explorations further. By that point, he had discovered every secret corner of both the palace and its surroundings, now he struck out into the city.

He followed Thor and his friends one evening as they went to occupy a local tavern in the village outside of the palace walls. He had flown over the village many times in his lessons with Freyja, but this was the first time that Loki had actually moved about there. The village was a surprising contrast to the luxury of the gilded palace of Asgard. The buildings and shops were made of a white brick, with thatched roofs that were placed far too closely together in the market place. The surrounding homes were of the same ilk, but they were granted more space for the inhabitants to raise their animals and grow their crops. In the market, people shouted their goods from doorways and windows. Blacksmiths hammered against steel horseshoes, fishwives were trying to sell the last of their day’s goods, and several women with heaving breasts and loose surcoat dresses were shouting lewd invitations at the passing prince and his friends. Everything was dirty, smelled foul, and reeked of peasantry… and Loki loved it. He loved it because it was such a difference from all that he had ever known.

Covered by the shade of darkness, Loki followed Thor and his comrades to the edge of the village where they entered a wooden long hall that had loud, boisterous voices coming from within. With his charm of invisibility, Loki entered the hall where he found many of the village’s inhabitants—including their children—seated at long wooden tables, laughing and drinking cups of ale and mead. It seemed that when it came to gathering and drinking, the nobles and commoners were not so different. The only difference here was that the women in the hall were just as loose with their words and drink as the men. Everyone was relaxed there, their cares seemingly forgotten at the door. Loki liked it there.

Loki would return to the long hall many times over the years. Though he wasn’t allowed to reveal himself there, lest he incur the wrath of Odin, he did find solace in immersing silently in the crowd and listening to them talk. He learned of their lives and daily concerns. He saw mere tavern arguments quickly escalate into Holmgangs. He learned about disputing land feuds between neighbors. He saw the long hall turn from a tavern into an official court room when the need arose. Loki watched with rapt attention as civil cases were brought before a selected chieftain, witnesses made their claims, and the appointed judges would vote to decide on the outcome. Only matters that couldn’t be decided upon unanimously would be brought to the higher levels of the Aesir court. Otherwise, these people were perfectly capable of handling their own affairs. The whole procedure was fascinating for Loki, as he had never been granted the access of knowledge of Odin’s council, and after seeing how these people handled their own matters, Loki began to wonder what the purpose of Odin and his council were exactly.

Once a year, Loki would return to the long hall to attend the village’s thing—the time for the local men to gather, hear complaints, make their judgments, and, if need be, pass their own laws for the village. Loki had grown quite fond of watching the things, and was even more enthused that Thor was never in attendance to these local procedures. The prince got enough training from his father and tutors, so the problems of lesser governing procedures did not concern him.
Loki, however, did not miss a meeting. The thrill of politics in action was too addicting for him. He would sit and listen as these men made their cases on civil, and sometimes, criminal cases. Often, he felt that justice was met out accordingly. Other times, though, a liar would have won their case, a party would be denied repatriations, or a man would have gotten away with harming a woman. In these instances, when he felt that their system had failed, Loki would take matters into his own hands. Riches would go missing, the guilty party would find themselves grievously injured, their homes may be burned... or a man would one day wake and find that he was no longer such. None of these cases could ever be traced back to Loki, of course. After all, the citizens of Asgard had not seen the Jotun prince outside of the palace walls before. But still, Loki felt that he was providing a great service to the Aesir. Especially when the rate of crime began to decrease, lest the criminal face the wrath of whatever curse was plaguing the village.

It was during one of these meetings, as Loki sat unseen in the shadows listening to a particularly heated debate about property damage issues that he ran into someone he had almost forgotten.

“Lovely Loki, hiding away in the dark, denying these poor people the light of his smile.”

Loki smiled to himself before he looked into the direction of the voice. He was under his invisibility charm, which meant that there was only one person there who could recognize him.

“Messenger, you have not lost your art of flattering words, I see.” Loki turned his head to see his old friend leaning against the wall next to him, that familiar devilish grin plastered onto his handsome face.

“Perhaps I did,” he shrugged. “Perhaps in all of our time apart no smile has graced my lips, no joy has filled my heart, and I have been forced to walk alone in darkness until I was allowed back into your blinding light.” He took Loki’s hand in his own and brought it to his lips for a small kiss.

“Or?” Loki raised an eyebrow.

“Or perhaps I’ve been off enjoying myself and siring bastards left and right, without a care in the world. Which seems more likely to you?”

“You are a bit of an ass, you know,” Loki laughed. Hermes returned his smile and embraced the younger man in a firm, friendly hug. “How have you been, Hermes? It has been far too long.”

“I am well, lovely Loki. Life in Olympus remains mostly dull--save for Dionysus’ parties, those do tend to end with a fun dismemberment or two... Those Maenads are insane,” he said with a shake of his head. “Oh! And my sweet aunt Aphrodite was caught cheating on my half-brother with my other idiot half-brother. It was quite a sight when Hephaestus magically chained them to the bed so we could all see. That made for a wonderful laugh. Also, Artemis and her pack of hounds shredded--”

Hermes’ rant was cut off by Loki’s hand being thrown over his mouth. “Please don’t start with the Olympus family scandals. My mind cannot possibly follow that right now.”

The messenger smirked and pulled away. “You’ll have to forgive me, it has been so long since we last spoke and I have enough stories to fill that impressive library your king likes to keep hidden away.”

“And while I’m sure that these stories would be more than enough entertainment for me, I’m more curious to know what it is that you’re doing here.”

“In this long hall?” Hermes gestured to the scene around them. “Just enjoying the acts of legal
procedures, much like yourself.”

“Is that so?”

“I’ll have you know, I have quite the legal mind. With my gift of persuasion, cunning, language, and writing, the mortals practically invoke my name during their commerce and procedures.”

“And here I thought that you were just a mischievous errand boy.”

“Why must you wound me so?”

“What are you really doing here?”

“Well, as you said, I am an errand boy. As my father’s personal messenger it is my duty to play runner for negotiations between him and your king. It seems that there are some heated debates going on. Your king believe that we are overstepping our bounds.”

“How so?” Loki asked. “And please stop calling him my king.”

“Fair enough, lovely boy,” Hermes chuckled. “Odin doesn’t seem too fond of what Zeus has begun doing with the mortals of our jurisdiction. Is it true that Odin brings souls of his dead here to feast with him in his halls?”

“Please,” Loki scoffed. “You’re bringing up that old tale? From what I’ve seen and heard, Odin will grant his chosen mortals favor sometimes and bring them here to become citizens of the Aesir, but only if they die gloriously in battle. Even so, they most certainly do not feast in his halls. Instead, they become what you see here,” Loki gestured to the group of men filling the long hall.

“Lost little creatures, unsure of their purpose in this afterlife, abandoned by Odin and left to desperately cling to what remains of their mortal life. Any interaction that they have with the actual Aesir family only occurs when a grievance is allowed to be heard by Odin or Thor and his friends are in need of cheap mead and women.”

“A simple yes or no would have served,” Hermes shrugged. “Anyway, the mortals in our charge were not receiving of this gift. They were left with nowhere to go when they passed on, their souls lost to time. So my father created a place where they could go and gave my uncle Hades charge over them.”

“He gave them their own place to reside in death?” Loki repeated. “How is it?”

“A bit dark and gloomy, much like my dear uncle. But it’s better than being lost, I suppose. At least there, the mortals could be with all whom they ever knew and it leaves the mystery out of wondering whether they are worthy or not.”

“Excellent point,” Loki nodded. “And this concerns Odin how?”

“It seems that he is not pleased with what he sees as our collecting of souls.”

“He believes that Olympus is building an army to attack against him?” Loki couldn’t help but laugh. “By the Norns that man is as paranoid as he is battle hungry.”

“And here I thought that the King of Asgard was supposed to be the wise one.”

“Sadly, considering who his heir is, I believe that you’re getting off lightly with just his paranoia. Thor would just go jumping through the portal and demand all of your heads.”
“Oh, that would be a sight to see,” he laughed. “He and Ares would be perfect for each other, I swear… How are you, Loki?”

“As well as can be expected.” He shrugged.

“Is your betrothed still giving you trouble?”

“Not as much as before. He alternates between trying to woo me and submitting me to my place. Neither one is particularly effective.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” Loki grinned. “I took a bit of your advice and decided to have my own kind of fun.”

“Did you now? Do tell me more.”

So they passed the evening in the shadows of the long hall with Loki regaling Hermes with his stories of mischief. It made Loki smile to see how impressed Hermes was when he told him of the plague of pests he had been infecting in Asgard, as well as his certain tortures against Amora. Hermes laughed and joked with Loki, often giving him pointers on how he could best torture his unsuspecting victims. It was refreshing for Loki to be able to talk so freely with someone who would actually appreciate what he had to say. He didn’t realize how much he had missed this, to be able to talk and laugh without having everyone’s eyes upon him, making sure that he play his proper part.

When the thing ended in the hall a majority of the citizens made their leave, while others stayed to partake in mead of celebration. Mead and ale meant a different kind of crowd than those of the thing, so it did not surprise Loki to see his betrothed come through the doors with his band of idiots an hour after the celebrations and music began. If his crashing through the entrance wasn’t enough to alert of his presence, then the adoring crowd that surrounded him afterwards sure was. Loki groaned when he saw the oaf smile and call for a tankard of ale for himself and the Warriors Three.

Hermes noted the change in Loki’s demeanor and turned to see the cause of it. It was then that he got his first true look at the prince of Asgard. On his last meeting to the realm, he had mostly been involved with negotiations between his fellow Olympians and the Aesir. He didn’t have the time to familiarize himself with the other man, nor did he particularly want to after seeing the way he had drunkenly approached Loki in the courtyard.

“I thought you said your betrothed doesn’t care for these local procedures.”

“He doesn’t. But, as you can see, that time has passed. Where there is mead and music, then you’ll most likely find him,” Loki explained. “And stop calling him that.”

“What? Your betrothed,” Hermes teased. “That is what he is, though. Your betrothed, your future husband, your one true lo—”

Loki threw his hand over the messenger’s mouth and hissed, “If you even try to finish that sentence, I will personally throw you from the Bifrost.”

Hermes laughed and kissed Loki’s palm before pulling back. “Point taken, my little trickster. No mentioning of your future marriage… Aside from that last one.”

“How kind of you.”
Hermes looked back to Thor as the prince engaged himself in loud conversation with his friends. Though he was only paying mind to the three closest to him, all the people gathered around them gave in to uproarious laughter at something that the prince had said. It was very obvious that the man was well loved, and he had the rugged handsomeness and glowing personality that seemed to be favored on this strange realm. Just from looking at him, it was hard to reconcile the image of the dashing prince sitting not too far away with the brute that Loki had described to him. Hermes thought that he should at least have some sort of hideous facial wound to match the beastly image Loki painted in his mind.

“Don’t stare too hard, messenger. You’re likely to be blinded by the glow that is Thor as well.” Loki rolled his eyes and turned away from his friend.

“I’m just trying to understand,” he said. “You’re right. He practically glows, but I don’t know where the light is coming from.”

“He glows because he is golden. Prince Thor with his golden hair and skin, born in the shining golden realm of Asgard. The golden prince who embodies everything that these simple-minded folk aspire to be; a fearless warrior who cares for nothing but the fight… No matter where the fight comes from.”

“Speaking from personal experience?”

“He seems to enjoy our fights particularly, he’s admitted as much to me before. When I try to fight him off it just makes him want me more. If I’m not fighting him physically, then it is with my words, which he does not seem to enjoy near as much.”

“Why do you indulge in his fighting, then, if that is what he enjoys?”

“…Because I couldn’t bear the alternative,” Loki sighed. “Ever since my first blood and they presented me to him, I’ve been nothing but a symbol. I’m their symbol for Jotunheim… A savage who should be considered lucky to be taken in by the generous Allfather, at least by their reasoning. In actuality, I represent the power that they have over my race. I show all of the nine how Jotunheim is beneath the heel of Asgard, as how it has always been… So I cannot just stand passively and allow him to touch me. I can’t let myself be tricked into thinking that he genuinely cares for me and I just can’t let myself be put into submission by him, or any of them.

“My father--my actual father--is the king of Jotunheim. I am a prince in my own right, and yet my whole life, I have been a hostage to these people. To the citizens, I’m a foundling monster who has snuck its way to the throne. To Odin and Frigga, I am a symbol of victory and peace through superiority. And to Thor… well, I’m just his pretty Jotun prize that he’s to be rewarded with whenever he proves himself worthy of the throne. So that is why I fight him, but I am none of these things. I am more than what they want. I am better than that.”

Loki didn’t realize how impassioned he had become until he felt something wet in his palm. Looking down, he saw the little droplets of blood that had pooled around the fingernails digging into his flesh.

“…You’ve been rehearsing that speech for quite some time, haven’t you?”

Loki, despite himself, laughed. “Just for the past few decades.”

“It shows. Though, next time I would suggest just tearing up slightly towards the end. It would really sell the passionate rage.”
“To be fair, I did think that I was going to have a few more centuries to practice.”

“If you were lucky,” he said. “For all you know, Thor could prove himself worthy of leadership this very night, and the next time I come, I could find your royal ass seated on that tacky golden throne.”

“Do you want me to throw you into the abyss? Is that your goal?”

“It would make for a most interesting adventure,” he shrugged. “But I think that I will have to save it for another time. I would much prefer to leave this hall. The stink of these people’s strange mead is getting to me.”

“Back to your realm, then?”

“Actually, I saw the most beautiful reflection pool out in the East Valley. I was hoping to visit there before I returned home. Such things of beauty cannot be appreciated just in passing.”

“You were going to go alone?” Loki smirked.

“Well, I had hoped for a lovely prince to accompany me,” Hermes returned the expression, “but it seems that Prince Thor is otherwise occupied.”

Loki looked over Hermes’ shoulder to see that Thor was indeed occupied, with the tavern wench currently straddling his lap. It didn’t anger him, though. It was more of an annoyance. Why should Thor make such a huge spectacle over Loki dancing with another man, yet he himself was allowed to rut against any creature who would have him?

“That is indeed a shame,” Loki said. “It seems that I will have to take his place. Hopefully you won’t be disappointed.”

“I will live with the pain, lovely Loki. Now come,” he extended his hand to Loki. When he took it, Hermes led him out of the long hall and into the night. “You may want to hold on tightly.”

Before Loki could ask why, Hermes’ hand gripped Loki’s tightly and the two took to the air. Loki was no stranger to flying, having done so many times in his bird form, but this was a whole new experience. The ground below passed by in one swift blur as the wind bit harshly at his Aesir flesh. He’d never flown in this form before, had never felt the wind whip his hair like this or the feel of the coldness so high in the atmosphere. If he were to fall from Hermes’ grip, there would be no time to shift into his magpie form. Loki would be forced to fall through the sky and meet an unpleasant ending with the ground. He was completely without his safety net now. It was single-handedly the most frightening and exciting experience of Loki’s life. He found himself wondering if this was how Thor felt when he took flight with his Mjolnir.

Too quickly, though, the flight ended and he and Hermes were lowering slowly down to the soft grass. Loki couldn’t help but laugh when the way the wings on the other’s sandals fluttered as they gently landed. His laughing subsided slightly, though, when he noticed that Hermes didn’t let go of his hand right away. Blushing, Loki decided to distract himself by looking around at where the messenger had brought him. They were in a lush green field near a large lake. The water was so still that the surrounding mountains were reflected perfectly in the calm water, as well as the bright night stars and the image of the closest realm to Asgard, Vanaheim. Hermes said that this was in the East Valley, but Loki had never seen this place before. If he had, he most surely would have flown here in his nights alone. It was far too beautiful here. Perfect, almost.

“Where are we?” Loki asked.
“This realm is your home, I thought that you would know.”

“My jailors prefer that I stay in my cage. I’ve never ventured out this far before.”

“That is a shame,” Hermes sighed. “As far as I can tell, we’re about a two day ride from the palace. Four, if you’d prefer to walk.”

“Two days?” Loki repeated in disbelief. “We were in the air for barely three minutes.”

Hermes grinned widely at him and pointed down to his sandals. “I’ve shown you these before, have I not. I told you, they give me unparalleled speed.”

“I must acquire a pair of those.”

“I’m sorry, lovely boy, but these come solely with the messenger job.”

Hermes chuckled at Loki’s pout. Loki was going to ask more about them, but he stopped himself when Hermes began to remove his short robe. He was left gaping there as the other took off his sandals and stood before him, completely unashamed of his nakedness. Caught off guard and not knowing what else to do, Loki turned away.

“What’s wrong?” He felt the messenger’s hand on his shoulder, and reflexively shook it off.

“I- I’m sorry. It’s j-just that…well, you’re…”

“Nude?” Hermes finished. Loki nodded but didn’t look back. “Don’t tell me. You’ve never seen another nude man before, have you?”

Loki shook his head. He heard Hermes laugh lightly from behind him and forced himself to bite his tongue. It wasn’t his fault that he had been isolated from almost every other male in the realm. If he had wanted to see another nude male, all he had to do was ask Thor, but there was no chance of that ever becoming a possibility.

He kept his eyes on the ground as Hermes began to walk around him until he was standing before him. “W- why are you naked?” Loki stammered.

“I was hoping that we could go for a swim, but if you’re uncomfortable…” Loki didn’t respond. “Oh come now, what happened to that lovely silver tongue?”

That got a laugh from the prince. Slowly, Loki began to raise his eyes from the ground towards Hermes’ strong legs. His eyes followed the olive skin upwards to the flaccid member that hung between and he paused for a moment. It was the first time he had seen someone else’s member, so he wasn’t sure what to expect. His own was smooth and hairless, lacking in girth but making up in decent length. The messenger’s was different. Even limp, it was a good size, covered in a small bushel of dark hair. Beneath the shaft, there was something that Loki had not seen before; two lumps of skin dangling between the legs. He knew what they were, he had learned enough of that in his studies, but it was another thing to actually see the testicles. Instead of having that, beneath Loki’s shaft, the skin gave way to the folds of his cunt.

“Don’t stare too hard, my prince. I may rise to the attention.”

Loki’s eyes instantly shot up from Hermes’ member to his face. His lips were pulled back into a full grin, showing off his bright teeth and his hazel colored eyes practically sparkled in the moonlight. Loki blushed harder and tried to look away, but the messenger gently put his hand under his chin to keep him from turning away. Loki could do nothing but accept the gaze from the
Olympian. Something happened to Loki in that moment, something that hadn’t happened in such a long time… There was a spark of emotion. Not since his time with Freyja had Loki ever felt any sense of actually caring about anyone in this realm. There were the few who did not earn his disdain, but there had never really been any true companions for Loki in Asgard. But here, with Hermes-- the man who taught him how to be sneaky, who could make him smile and laugh, and who expected nothing from him-- Loki felt for once that he wasn’t completely alone.

Loki could say that he didn’t need anyone all he liked, and for the most part it would be true, but he couldn’t deny that in a land full of enemies, the loneliness does get to a man. So whatever it was that caused this spark of emotion, whatever was the reason behind the way that Hermes was looking at him, it felt nice. It gave Loki a feeling of warmth. Not entirely in the metaphorical sense either. It was something real, tangible. A small, coiled ball of warmth settled in Loki’s center and was slowly spreading outward. He could feel it spreading through his veins, pulsing as it went along. It was similar to the feeling of his seidr, but somehow it felt stronger, more right in his body. It felt like he was becoming whole.

“Ah!” Hermes gasped and pulled his hand away. Loki looked at him with his brows knitted in confusion; a look that the Olympian returned in kind. “Well… that is peculiar.”

“What?”

“Your appearance,” Hermes said, reaching out his hand hesitantly towards Loki. “It’s changed.”

“W- what do you mean?”

Instead of answering, Hermes gently touched his cheek. Loki felt his skin tingle at the contact. “It feels so cold.”

Shocked, Loki backed away from Hermes and touched his own skin. He didn’t feel any change. He didn’t feel cold, he felt warm. He looked down to his hand and saw something that he had thought impossible. His skin was a light shade of azure, with raised markings running up his arm under his tunic. The shock of it all still gripped him as he rushed to the reflecting pool and looked down at his image. The sight of it stole the air from his lungs. Loki looked into the water and for the first time ever, he saw himself.

The blue of his flesh hadn’t stopped at just his arm this time, rather his face contained the same shading of soft blue. Ruby colored eyes stared back at him as his fingers began to trace over the raised markings on his face. On his forehead, he followed three ridges that ran in a semicircle. He knew these marks; they signified the crown of the royal lineage, marking him of noble blood. Three parallel marks ran under his chin, and from the corner of his eyes as well, markings that all Jotuns bore, showing them to be the descendants of Bergelmir.

Without giving it anymore thought, Loki began to remove his tunic and breeches until he stood there naked, save for the pendant around his neck. The flesh beneath his clothes all bore the same hue, with more markings raised on his skin, running all along his body. The marks all ran in lines of three. Three lines starting from the center of his sternum and stretching out over his collarbone and around his shoulders. Beneath his pectorals three lines ran up and out along his sides, while three others went down towards his hips. On his biceps, the three lines circled his arms with three small dots in between each; the same marks were on his legs as well. On his hands, there were markings like arrows--three of course-- running up just until they reached the wrist. Loki didn’t know how long he ran his eyes over his new skin, but he didn’t care. All he felt was a sense of peace in his real flesh, and a sense of relief that it didn’t fade away as quickly as it had the last time.
“Loki?”

He had almost forgotten about Hermes. When he turned around, the Olympian was standing close to him, looking at him in concern. Loki didn’t know why, but the sight of it was amusing. A wide grin spread across his lips and the laughter escaped from him.

“Are you alright?”

“I am wonderful,” he laughed. “I am me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“This is me, Hermes. This is who I truly am.”

“I’m still not following you.”

“Odin… when he brought me here, he put his curse on me, to make me passable as one of them.” Loki looked down at his bare arm again, his red eyes raking over his beautiful blue flesh. “This is what I truly am. Who I’m truly meant to be.”

“You’ve never seen your natural form before?”

“No,” he shook his head. “There was never a way to break Odin’s curse. I- I do not know how this has happened.”

“Has it happened before?” Hermes asked, stepping closer to examine Loki’s new form for himself.

“Once, but only for a moment. Thor was hurting me and I was just so angry… It only lasted for a second. I burned him.”

“You burned him?”

“Yes… When he touched me, his skin blackened and burned.”

There was a pause where neither said a word. Hermes looked as if he was assessing the situation, while Loki waited for-- well, he didn’t know what he was waiting for. For Hermes to look away, for his form to change back, for something. But nothing was happening. Nothing at all, until Hermes’ hand came forward to touch his cheek again.

“Don’t--”

Hermes’ hand cupped his cheek and stayed there, his thumb wiping away a stray tear that Loki didn’t even know had slipped out. Loki was confused, though. Hermes wasn’t pulling away in pain and the skin of his palm wasn’t cracking.

“I- it doesn’t hurt you?”

“It is cold, but not painfully so. More like jumping into the sea during the harvest months.”

“But, Thor… There were tales of our skin burning Aesir soldiers, even Odin himself. It’s one of the reasons why they consider them-- consider me a monster.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Loki,” Hermes shrugged. “I feel no pain in touching you. Perhaps your anatomy is only harmful to the Aesir. It would make sense. Everything I’ve seen here is bright and warm, while you are dark and cold… But they must be a race of fools if they could look at you the way you are now and consider you to be a monster.”
“What do you see, then? When you look at me, what do you see?”

Hermes smiled softly and stepped in closer. His hazel eyes locked deep into Loki’s red, and the other prince could feel the warmth radiating from them. The hand cupping his cheek moved softly to tuck his ebony hair behind his ear. His fingers gently touched the pointed tip of Loki’s new ear, earning a small laugh from the other.

“I see my lovely Loki. And he’s more beautiful than ever, because this is the first time I’ve seen him truly happy.”

Another laugh escaped from his lips, and suddenly he was surging forward, closing the gap between them. Hermes was caught off guard, but only for a moment. Loki’s lips felt like ice against his own, but they were soft and urgent as the prince kissed him like a man starved. The Olympian returned the kiss with equal enthusiasm. When Loki’s lips parted in a soft moan, he took the advantage to slip his tongue between his lips. It curled against Loki’s, teasing at first. Despite Thor’s attempts, Loki was actually inexperienced with kissing in this manner, so he tried his best to mimic Hermes’ movements and hoped that he was doing it correctly.

He must have done something right, though, because Hermes let out a delicious moan as he wrapped an arm around Loki’s waist, pulling him to his body. The messenger kissed him deeply and Loki’s arms wrapped around his shoulders to cling tightly to him. When their lips parted, Loki was left gasping for breath as Hermes ran kisses along his neck, his teeth playfully grazing the ridges in his skin. Loki felt a flush of embarrassment when he felt something poking at his thigh. He knew what it was—after having been cornered by Thor one too many times—but for once the thought of it didn’t disgust him. As Hermes lavished his attention on his neck, Loki thought what it would be like to lay down there in the grass and part his legs for the Olympian. Would it hurt? Would it feel like defeat and submission? Would Hermes be gentle with him if he allowed him to slip between his folds? Or would Hermes, possible, allow Loki to mount him?

These thoughts and other lewd, wonderful images ran through his mind when Loki began to feel something else. It was something odd, something he hadn’t felt in so long. It was as if a fog was slowly beginning to creep on him, swallowing him whole and weighing him down. Loki knew what the feeling was, but he hadn’t known it since--

Loki’s eyes widened with a shocking panic when he realized. “Hermes, get off!”

He pulled himself out of the Olympian’s embrace with such force that he stumbled and fell back. The color bled out of his skin and he was once again trapped in his pale Aesir flesh. Hermes looked on with extreme confusion, trying to calm Loki down, but the other was too panicked. Loki grabbed up his clothes and attempted to throw his tunic on, but he could feel the fog in his mind growing thicker. It wasn’t full yet, though, there was still time.

“Loki!” Hermes shouted and managed to finally get his attention. “Loki, what’s wrong?”

“Heimdall.” Loki whispered the name.

“I thought you said he wasn’t watching you anymore?”

“He’s not-- he wasn’t. He… I can’t let him see me here. Not with you.”

“Alright,” Hermes nodded. “Should I take you back to the palace?”

“No need,” Loki shook his head. Before Hermes could protest, Loki closed his eyes and concentrated on the thought of his rooms in the palace. “I’m already there.”
When he opened his eyes, he was standing before his bed. The room was empty, thankfully. Hulda had turned in for the night hours ago, when Loki first snuck out to go to the thing. The room was dark, save for the candle on his desk, nearly melted down to the base. Loki snubbed the wick out before he sat himself down at the desk, leaning forward so that he could hide his face under his arms. He could still feel the gate keeper’s gaze creeping on him. It wasn’t completely there, but just enough for Loki to take notice. If had let the situation with Hermes get further than it did…

“Heimdall,” Loki spoke softly. There was a tear welling up in his eye, but he refused to let it fall. “I can feel you there, gatekeeper. I am sorry for what I did-- what I almost did. It was not my intention to break my oath with either you or with my betrothal. You have granted me much freedom these past years, and for that you have my eternal gratitude. Hermes is just the first true friend that I’ve had since Freyja. I mistook that friendship for something else. I beg of you, please, do not let my one mistake take it away. Please, Heimdall… Don’t make me go back to the cage.”

It took longer than before, but Heimdall gave his answer. The fog and weight lifted from him, and Loki was blissfully alone once more.

He heaved a sigh of relief and sat back in his chair. His room was filled with the light of the low moon, and it illuminated his pale skin. Loki looked down at his arm, his fingers absently tracing over where the pointed ridges had run along the blue skin. Why had it happened again? Why had it last so long this time? It wasn’t like beforehand, when he had just felt a rush of energy burst through him and released into his arm, hurting Thor. This time it was peaceful, warm, and comforting. It was the way Hermes made him felt… Perhaps the secret lay in the emotions.

A soft knock came from the window, making Loki jerk his head up. Behind the colored glass he could see the silhouette of a person. Loki’s room was one of the highest in the palace and had no balcony. He smiled to himself, knowing who the visitor was. He opened the window and was unsurprised to see Hermes hovering outside, the little wings on his sandals flapping like a humming bird’s. Loki leaned against the window pane and rested his chin on his hand. Hermes had his arms crossed over his chest and was looking expectedly at the other.

“I suppose I owe you some sort of explanation,” Loki sighed.

“It would help. Impressive disappearing act, by the way. May I come in?”

“You’d best not. It wouldn’t do to draw attention.”

“Whereas a person floating outside of your bedroom window is perfectly normal?”

“You could make yourself unable to be seen by anyone who would happen by. Fooling the gatekeeper is another matter. He only just now looked away.”

“I see,” he nodded. “So he was watching us down at the waters?”

“Not entirely,” Loki shook his head. “It’s hard to explain. I made a deal with Heimdall after we had first met. I promised him to adhere to my betrothal and not cause any intentional harm against the royal family. In exchange, he would grant me my freedom until the day I’m to be bonded to Thor. So long as I adhere to the terms I set, then he will keep his part of the bargain.”

“Ah…” Hermes nodded, his hand rubbing at the back of his neck. “And when we kissed, you nearly broke your arrangement.”

“I’m sorry,” Loki said as he wiped at the corner of his eyes. He refused to let anyone see him cry. “What happened down there… it was one of the best moments of my life--”
“But it cannot happen again,” Hermes finished.

“I like you Hermes, I really do. You’re the only person I’ve ever known who has never expected anything of me and you’ve helped me so much in just the two times that I’ve met you…but I can’t let myself be locked up in their cages again. I can’t waste what little freedom I have left.”

“I will not say that I am not disappointed, Loki. But I understand.”

“In another life, then maybe,” Loki said wistfully.

“Best not to think of things that we cannot have. Instead, cherish what you do have. For now, you have a friend should you ever need one.” The messenger reached his hand out, placing it over Loki’s.

“Thank you, Hermes.” Loki gave Hermes’ hand a gentle squeeze. “Will I see you again?”

“My father and Odin still have a long way to go in their negotiations, so I may become a regular visitor here soon enough. The next time I visit, you and I will sneak away and do something really fun. I promise.”

“I look forward to it,” Loki smiled. “Goodbye, Hermes.”

“Be well, lovely Loki. I will see you again soon…By the way, you left these strange garments behind,” Hermes pulled Loki’s discarded breeches from the bag slung around his shoulder. “I think I will keep them. It does get cold in just this robe sometimes.”

Loki blinked and Hermes was gone, leaving behind only a gust of wind from the force of his flight. Loki smiled sadly to himself as he closed his window. He was exhausted from the long day, and there were few hours remaining in the night. Hulda would be waking him at first light for his lesson with Mimir. Odin was expecting a visit from Queen Alflyse of the Dark Elves, so the foundling would need to brush up on his history of Svartalfheim, so as to not embarrass the royal family.

When Loki got to his bed, he fell down face first onto the featherbed. He would have been content to just fall asleep in that manner, but Hulda would no doubt have questions if the first thing she saw in the morning was his pale ass. So Loki forced himself to crawl under his blankets, throw off his tunic, and find a comfortable position. Before he let himself fall asleep, though, Loki thought back to the reflection pool. He thought of Hermes, of what they had done. But mostly, he thought about how he saw himself for the first time. The feeling of bliss at simply being who he was meant to be, no matter how short-lived it was, was indescribable. Loki concentrated on that sense of happiness he had felt, but nothing happened for him. Whatever had happened, it could not be replicated with a simple thought. Thoughts couldn’t substitute for the emotions. Loki would need to learn how to control that if he ever wanted to have control over his true form. Because Hermes was right, Loki’s natural form was beautiful and most importantly his. No one had the right to deny it to him.

He swore, he would make Odin pay for what he had done, for locking his true form away from him.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry that this took so long! Still no Tony yet, but he will be coming soon. Loki is
gonna have some crazy adventures first and I've got to age him up a bit. At this point in the story— with the longevity of the lives of the Aesir and Jotuns—I'd say that Loki is about 16 to 17 while Thor would be 19 to 20.

In the next chapter, Loki and his new bff discover a hidden passage that leads out of Asgard! Stay tuned ;)
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Several months had passed since Hermes’ last visit to Asgard, and Loki found himself growing rather bored. He tried to continue on with his tricks and pranks, and though they did give him some sense of satisfaction, he found that he was growing listless. There is only so many times that one can catch a tapestry on fire or send someone screaming from their room with the illusion of snakes before the joke begins to lose its humor. After a while, he found that he was simply just going through the motions. He would get up in the mornings, listen to whatever Hulda had to say, do his tutoring sessions, afternoon with the ladies of the court, sometimes practice with his spear and knives, and then dinner with the royal family. Somehow, his outlet for frustration had been placed in the monotonous list that was his daily life.

Oh, someone said something foul about him? Just conjure a swarm of insects in their beds. That woman had given him a foul look? No problem. She would find herself awake in the morning with her face covered in boils. If he simply just didn’t like a person’s face, then it was no problem at all to push them over while he was under his invisibility charm. These things were fun at first, but now they were just so boring. There was something missing, Loki knew, but he just wasn’t sure what it was.

Shockingly enough, it turned out to be Thor who would give Loki his new rush of excitement. It occurred on the evening that the court was celebrating the new betrothal of Tyr and Lorelei. It seemed that her parents were not too happy when the previous engagement between Tyr and their elder daughter was broken. They had begged and pleaded with the Allfather for another chance, going so far as to send Amora away to Alfheim, so desperate were they to find a way to climb the next rung of the social ladder. After weeks of badgering, Odin finally relented to their request, and now Loki was forced to sit at the table on the dais next to Thor and his friends as all of the court used the occasion to drown themselves in mead.

As the festivities wore on, Loki just sat there, picking at his food and contemplating whether or not to freeze everyone’s feet to the dance floor. All around him people talked and laughed loudly with music blaring so that he could barely even hear himself think. That was one thing that Loki could never quite get used to, the deafening noise of everything. Perhaps it had something to do with how he was presented to the citizens of this realm, but Loki found that he hated the abundance of noise. What was wrong with a little bit of silence from time to time? Why must everyone shout all of the time? After a while, Loki learned how to drown the noise out when he needed to. So he didn’t notice that Thor was practically shouting in his ear until he felt the prince’s hand on his arm.

“Loki!”

He jumped at the sudden contact of Thor’s hand on his arm and dropped his fork, earning a few muffled laughs from Thor’s friends. Loki’s cheeks flushed in a light red and he narrowed his eyes at Thor. The prince at least had the decency to look slightly apologetic for once.

“What?” Loki asked, his voice low and full of annoyance.

“I was trying to get your attention for a few minutes now. Are you alright?” Thor’s hand moved as if to touch his forehead, but Loki swatted it away.

“I am fine. Did you need something?”
“No need to be so testy, princess,” Fandral sniggered from across the table. Loki shot him an unamused glare and he looked away.

“Fandral, guard your tongue,” Thor warned. “I was merely going to ask how your studies were coming along.”

“I have many studies, Thor. You must be more specific.”

“Well…,” Thor seemed to be at a loss as to what to ask. He put his hand on the back of his neck and looked upwards. “I know nothing of the crafts and household management that my mother has been teaching you. Such things would be inappropriate for me to learn.” Loki can practically see the light going off in his head when he finally thinks of something. “Oh! Your lessons with Mimir and Kvasir. They’ve been teaching you history and politics, have they not?”

“Since I could hold my own head up. It is all getting rather repetitive now.”

“I understand,” Thor laughed, as if Loki had told some great joke. “I never much cared for their lessons either. I think I spent more time staring out the window than I did listening to them speak.”

Loki gave Thor a nod, but didn’t say anything more. He returned to his plate and picked at the slice of boar still bleeding before him. Truly these people were animals. Next to him, Thor was looking desperately at his friends, trying to find some sort of help in the situation. Luckily for him, the good-natured Volstagg was the one to lend a hand.

“So, um, Loki,” Volstagg paused to clear his throat, “how fares your seidr lessons?”

That question piqued Loki’s interest. He lifted his eyes towards Volstagg, one eyebrow raised. It was surprising to hear of anyone being interested in his seidr, let alone one of Thor’s friends.

“Fine, I suppose. Since Freyja left I’ve been without a tutor, so the more complex spells have been a touch more difficult to master, but I have managed. Things like transfiguration are like child’s play to me now.”

“Ah, interesting,” Volstagg nodded. It was clear from his expression, though, that he didn’t know what Loki was referring to, and the prince did not have the patience to explain it to him. It was for the better, though, as he could hear Fandral let out a snort.

“Yes, your hobby has gained you quite a reputation around here. Particularly after the Svadilfari incident.” Fandral, Volstagg, and Hogun all try to hide their laughter behind their hands, but Loki sees it well enough. He didn’t understand the context, but he felt that it had something to do with him.

“How about your spear lessons, Loki?” Sif quickly jumped in. “Thor said that you were getting quite good. Perhaps you will join me in the ring one day.”

Loki smirked, but not because of Sif’s suggestion. Thor hadn’t seen Loki train with his weapons since the day he had thrown the knife at his head. He only knows about his skill with a spear from the times he tried to crowd Loki against the wall while he was carrying his practice spear. If Thor thought that was good, he should see Loki when he really tries.

“Oh Sif, don’t taunt him now. Loki has become quite skilled, it is true, but you’ve been wielding your spear and sword since you’ve been able to walk. It would not be a fair fight,” Thor smiled, then had the audacity to throw his arm over Loki’s shoulder in a friendly manner. Loki’s hands were gripping his cutlery so tight that his knuckles were turning white.
“No,” he says with a forced smile. “It wouldn’t be fair at all, but then again, fights between Aesir and Jotun are rarely fair.” Everyone at the table sends an incredulous look in his direction. “If we were to even the odds, I should be allowed to use my seidr. The Lady Sif is greatly skilled in her weapon of choice, it seems only fair that I be allowed to wield mine.”

“Come now, Loki. I’m sure that your tricks are fine, but it is not a true test of a warrior,” Thor smiled and spoke slowly.

“Hmm… Perhaps you should share these sentiments with your father. It seems as if no one has told him about these standards you’ve set.”

Loki smirks when he sees Thor’s eyes narrow slightly at the implication. Before he can say anything, though, Sif jumps in again.

“Thor, don’t be so hard on Loki. Sure, he may not be trained in the warrior’s way, but I’m sure that his seidr is very capable.”

“I’m sure it is,” he laughed.

“It managed to harm you before,” Loki muttered, but it was just loud enough for Thor to hear. He felt the prince’s hand on his shoulder begin to tighten.

“All right then. We should put this to the test. Loki,” Thor turned completely towards him, “we’re going on a hunt tomorrow in the West Valley. It has been said that a family of bilgesnipes are roaming through the forests there. If you manage to take down at least one using only your seidr, I shall never say anything against your arts again.”

“And if I lose?”

A familiar look comes over Thor’s features and he leans down to whisper into Loki’s ear. “If you lose, then you and I will have one night together away from our chaperones. No arguing and no fighting.” Thor leans back with a particularly smug look on his face. “Do we have a wager?”

Loki thinks on it for a moment. “You know that I cannot travel during the day. The suns are too much for me.”

“That will be your problem to solve. You can always say no. There is no shame in admitting your weaknesses.”

If Thor was hoping to goad Loki into doing something foolish, well then for once the oaf succeeded. Loki narrowed his eyes dangerously and accepted the wager without giving it another thought. He didn’t consider how he was going to keep up with this hunting party if he could not travel by day, nor did he think about the consequences of losing. All because Thor had used that one word. Weak. Loki would show him.

Hulda was, of course, furious when Loki announced his intentions of leaving for the hunt. He had begun packing his supplies that very night after supper, all the while trying to drown out her screeching of what a horrible idea this whole affair was. While Loki agreed that this was one of his more foolish ideas, he was too stubborn to back down. His plan was to leave in the night, protected by the cool dark, for the West Valley until he could find a place to rest. In the morning, he would change into his magpie form to gain more ground and, hopefully, beat Thor and his company to the band of bilgesnipes.
His handmaid, however, had other plans in mind. She urged him to give up on this foolish notion and just accept defeat in Thor’s wager. He wouldn’t be properly chaperoned, she said. Any bandit could come along and do harm to him. He wouldn’t be protected, and blah, blah, blah… She meant well, he knew that. She was only trying to look after him, but that didn’t stop him from calling upon his seidr to freeze her feet to the ground as he set off into the night.

Loki relied on his gift of teleporting to the edge of the valley forest, giving him the best advantage over Thor and his company, and giving the added benefit of covering his tracks. The forest was thick, the trees pressed so closely together that the moonlight barely shone onto the forest floor. As far as Loki could tell, there were no broken limbs or heavy tracks that would indicate any bilgesnipes, but he marched forward into the dark, gripping his rucksack tightly.

Three miles into the woods and the sounds of insects dissipated. Loki didn’t find that to be a good sign. He had found a small stream and followed the flow of the water further into the woods, but he noticed something off. There were no insects chirping, no nocturnal animals rustling about or drinking from the stream. There was nothing at all, as if this whole part of the realm was devoid of life. Loki soldiered on, keeping himself alert for any sign of life, but none ever came. Loki walked until light finally began to penetrate through the trees as day began to break, and still Loki found himself completely alone.

Though he grew tired, Loki continued on his trek even as a little voice inside his head began to whisper that this whole matter was futile. This was nothing but a farce, a trick on Thor’s part to not only humiliate Loki, but to trick him into a single night together. While the realization seemed to be proving more accurate the further into the woods he walked, Loki was too stubborn to turn back now. He had to come back with something lest he look like a complete fool.

Even in this thickly wooded area, though, the heat of Asgard’s twin suns was beginning to take a toll on Loki. His pale flesh felt like too tight, sweat was soaking through his tunic and he felt as if he was being cooked from the inside. He wanted to shift into his mare form, but he barely had room to maneuver the paths in his Aesir flesh. Doing the only thing he could, he stripped his clothes and switched to his magpie form. He could no longer bear the weight of his rucksack, but he would hopefully find an open area not too far away and be able to return for it.

In his new form, Loki flew above the treeline and surveyed the area. The forest seemed to be endless, stretching out as far as he could see into the horizon. He flew over the trees, seeing no other birds in the air nor any animals on the ground. With his sharper eyes, he could see that he was correct in his assumption that there was little life in this part of the realm. No animals, no homes, and even the trees seemed to be dying the closer he flew to the mountain range. Bilgesnipes were massive, carnivorous creatures. Some ran as tall as thirty feet in height and fifty in length, and they were known to be able to consume their own body weight in a single day. He was right, in this dead forest, there were no bilgesnipes, just a foolish boy trying to prove himself.

Loki felt his heart seizing in his chest and it took all of his will to lower himself safely back to the ground. As soon as he’d landed, he sheds his magpie form in order to let out a vicious scream. Loki grabbed his hair by the roots and screamed out his anger and frustration, continuing to yell until his voice cracked and broke. His skin was burning in the dim sunlight, but he was too furious to care. Thor had tricked him. Thor! That damned idiot who thought with his hammer not his mind had tricked Loki into going the wrong way. Now he was a day behind Thor and his company, lost in the Western Valley with no supplies or shelter. Of course, getting himself back to the palace would take no more than a thought for Loki, but for the moment, he was more content to rage at his own stupidity.

He beat his fists against the ground, screamed, and cursed until he could not hear his own voice.
anymore. His vocal chords felt raw, like they were scratched and bleeding. The suns were burning him, turning the pale skin on his arm an ugly red. His knuckles were bruised from the repeated slamming into the ground. He was tired, he was hungry and thirsty, and he had lost his ability to think logically. Still, Loki raged on, picking up any objects he could find on the ground and throwing them as far as he could.

His fingers wrapped around a particularly large stone, and, without looking, he flung it forward. He didn’t see where the stone landed, however, he did hear something that sounded like an echo. That gave him pause. Curious, he picked up another stone and threw it in the same direction. He heard the echo again. Loki forced himself up on shaky legs and walked forward to where he threw the stones. He walked forward until he saw something odd; there was an opening in the ground. It was small, only about seven feet wide, with large boulders standing at the mouth of the hole. The only light came from the dim sunlight shining on the opening, illuminating only a few feet of the open cavern. Loki could see large stones covered in lichen and moss protruding from the ground below.

Loki kicked another rock into the opening and listened as he heard the rock tumble downwards, further than he could see.

It was only as he stood there, examining the cavern, that Loki began to feel the pain that the suns were causing on his skin. Loki looked over his shoulder, sure that there was no living thing in sight, and turned back, shrugging his shoulder. There was no other suitable shelter in sight and he didn’t have the energy required to stay in his magpie form until nighttime, nor was he quite ready to teleport himself back to the palace. So Loki knelt down to steady himself on a boulder and began to climb down into the ground. He climbed down, gripping hard onto the loose rocks, careful not to lose his footing as the darkness began to engulf him.

Loki wasn’t sure how long it took him as he traveled at a snail’s pace down the unsteady path. All he knew was that by the time he found even footing his body was throbbing from pain, he felt exhausted and nauseous from the heat, and his hands were cramped and dirty. Still, the coolness of the cavern provided well enough shelter, and he sat down to try to ease the uneasy feeling in his body. So he sat there, alone in the dark, trying to steady his breathing while his body tortured him. In the distance, he could hear something that sounded like water dripping. The cavern must lead off into a deeper cave structure. He knew that there could be something lurking in the cave, something just waiting for any idiot to stumble into its home, but he was much too exhausted to care. Instead Loki gently laid down on his side, curled his knees up to his chest, and closed his eyes. He was asleep within moments to the sound of the water dripping.

He wasn’t sure how long he was asleep there, but he knew it must have been some time as when he opened his eyes, he found that what little light he had from the morning was completely gone. He was alone in total darkness, not even able to make out the outline of his hand in front of him. Loki would be lying if he said that he wasn’t even a little bit afraid, though he knew he had no reason to be. He was miles away from civilization, in a dark cave in a forest devoid of all life. As far as things went, this was probably the safest place he could be. The thought was enough to pull a small laugh from him and put his mind a little more at ease.

“Well,” Loki sighed. “Here I am. At least it’s not raining.”

Still laughing, Loki forced himself to his feet, even as his body screamed in protest at him. His skin no longer felt as if it was burning him alive, but it did feel tight, stinging, and throbbing. The nausea had faded somewhat, leaving an ache in his stomach, but overall he just felt drained. Like before, it would probably take too much effort to transform back into a magpie, let alone teleport back to the palace. It seemed as if he would be stuck there for the evening at least. He needed
water, so he listened carefully for the sound of the dripping water. When he heard it again, he focused all the energy he could into conjuring a ball of flame. The fire did nothing to help with his current heat exhaustion, but he needed the light and water more than he needed rest at the moment.

Loki’s eyes stung at first from the sudden brightness, but he blinked away the tears and the scene around him began to come back into focus. All he could see around him for the moment was the heavy rock formation covered in moss in this cramped space. Ahead of him, though, was a circular opening, leading further into the cave. Taking careful steps, Loki began to walk forward through the entrance. As soon as he stepped through the entrance, a large gust of wind blew at Loki, putting out his flame and nearly toppling him over. He cursed under his breath and tried his best to call upon his flame again, but he could only conjure sparks. Loki began to panic, but he noticed that something odd had occurred. Either his eyes were finally adjusting to the darkness, or there was some sort of light coming from somewhere in the cave. It was dim, but there was something, somewhere, casting a blue hue in the cave.

It wasn’t much, but it gave Loki enough to see the stalagmites standing throughout the space, as well as the long pillars that were hanging from the ceiling. He could still hear the sound of water somewhere in the distance, so he saw no choice but to continue forward. He stepped slowly and gently forward, past the sharp rock formations until the cavern began to open up to him and the dim blue light became brighter, the sound of dripping water slowly turning into rushing flow. Soon, Loki found himself standing in an immense cavern, the ceiling of which was raised hundreds of feet over his head. The blue light, he found, had been coming from a waterfall that was reflecting the moonlight. He didn’t know where he was exactly, but he could only assume that he was in the Western Mountains. A long way from the palace, and a long way from Thor.

The air was cool in here, which helped soothe Loki’s tender skin. He walked towards the waterfall, careful not to step over the ledge. Looking over it, he saw that he couldn’t find where the waterfall ended, but rather it kept flowing down deep into the darkness. Perhaps this was another place where Asgard ended and the great abyss of the universe began? He didn’t know, nor did he care to find out at this time. Instead, he reached his cupped hands out to catch water from the fall. Loki drank the water greedily, not before realizing how parched he truly was. He was hungry as well, but there was not much that he could do about that. As Loki drank from the cold water, he noticed something strange. There was an alcove behind the falls. Smiling, Loki looked at the distance between his ledge and the alcove. It was a bit of a jump, and there was a good probability that he wouldn’t make it. What the hell, though? What else was he supposed to do?

With that thought in mind, Loki backed up a few paces, breathed in deep and made a dash for the ledge. He waited until the very last second before he jumped forward, his heart stilled as he jumped over the abyss. This was the first time he was actually afraid of the fall. Beforehand, he had always had the safety-net of his seidr to assist should he find himself in danger. This time, though, he was on his own. He doesn’t think that his heart began to beat again until after he fell past the rushing water and onto the hard, rocky surface of the alcove. For a while, all he could do was lie there and try to control his breathing and heart rate. That was, by far, the stupidest thing he had ever done… despite how fun it may have been.

When he finally did force himself to move, he got up on his feet, only to nearly fall over from his wobbly knees. The alcove, he quickly learned, was in fact a tunnel, leading deeper into another part of the cave. The blue hue of the moonlight was even brighter in the distance, so Loki followed forward. The light became brighter and brighter until it was near blinding. The tunnel opened up into another circular cavern, no bigger than the size of Loki’s room in the palace. Spaced evenly along the walls were large boulders, carved into the shape of wheels. Curious, Loki went to the closest one and tried to push the rock, but it wouldn’t budge. Same for the one beside it, and the one beside that.
The strangest thing, though, was that placed in the center of the cavern, beneath the blinding blue light that Loki was no longer sure was coming from the moon, was a pillar. On top of the pillar sat a pouch. So someone had been in this cave before? Or perhaps whoever left the pouch was still here now? The thought gave him enough of a fright to look over his shoulder, but all that did was confirmed that he was indeed alone. Oh well, he shrugged. Share and share alike.

He stepped forward and took the pouch from the pillar. He could hear the sound of something clacking together within the pouch, so that eliminated the idea of food. When he opened it, though, he found what looked to be more stones. Loki pulled one of the stones from the bag only to find that it had been smoothed so finely that it reflected the light. He turned it over in his hand and saw a rune engraved into the stone. So someone had left their runes alone in a cave behind a waterfall in an empty forest…

“Where the hell am I?” Loki muttered.

Annoyed, he tossed the pouch back onto the pillar. His intent was to leave it there, but he had forgotten to close the pouch, so the stones spilled out onto the top of the pillar. What occurred took Loki’s breath away.

The Cave of Time.

For a long while, the boy just stood there, unblinking as he stared down at the runes. He had heard stories about how the Allfather consulted the runes from time to time for guidance, and he himself had been given lessons on how to read the runes, but he never quite believed in it. They were just stones, that randomly showed a particular rune. There was no way that it could respond to a person’s questions accurately… Just to be sure, Loki picked up the bag and threw the runes down again.

The same answer was given.

He tried again. The same answer.

Again. The same answer.

He threw down the stones over and over again, only to receive the same results. Loki let out a frustrated growl as he began to lose count.

“Alright, fine. I believe you!” He snapped. “What the hell is the Cave of Time anyway?”

What do you seek?

“That doesn’t quite answer the question, does it? What good are you if you don’t provide me with the answers I want?” Loki cast the runes again, but received the same answer once more.

“Fine,” he sighed. “Where may I find food?”

He cast the stones, but this time they all fell facing downward, only their smoothed surfaces showing. Loki’s eyebrow raised in confusion. He nearly jumped out of his skin, though, when he heard a loud sound coming from behind him. Loki turned so quickly that he fell back against the pillar, knocking the runes to the floor. The fourth boulder against the wall was moving. It slowly rolled away, revealing another opening that was hidden away. Loki’s eyes darted from the opening back down to the runes on the ground.

Go.
Loki fought to get his heart-rate back under control, all the while feeling so foolish for being frightened. He was a creature born with natural seidr, damn it! Simple tricks in some enchanted cave shouldn’t be having this effect on him. As long as he kept telling himself that, it made it easier to put one foot in front of the other. He walked closer to the opening, but stopped before he could enter. The room he was currently in was absorbed in some kind of blue light, illuminating everything, but for some reason it stopped short at the opening. It made no sense to him. The light should continue on and illuminate at least part of its interior, but it just completely stopped, as if it was being absorbed by the darkness. Loki wanted to turn back, but before he could, he felt something on his arms. There was something inside of the opening, pulling him in. Loki tried to fight it off, but whatever had its hold on him was strong and he found himself being yanked into the darkness.

Loki was pulled off of his feet into the opening, his body rushing forward at a speed that he didn’t think even Hermes could achieve. He felt his body being stretched in different directions, invisible walls closing in on him as he tried to move and break free. All around him, though, there was silence. Even as he opened his mouth to vocalize his terror the sound of his voice was swallowed by this all encompassing darkness. This, he thought, is what madness must feel like. The feeling of being trapped in some kind of endless void with not even the sound of your own voice for comfort, all the while knowing that you’re still alive because the feeling of something pulling you forward. He was moving, even though he was trapped.

He didn’t know how long he was trapped in that void. All concept of time seemed to fade away in the wake of his terror, but before he could completely lose his sanity, he was mercifully brought to a crashing halt. Quite literally. Whatever it was that had pulled him from the cave spat out him onto a cold, wet ground. The force of the impact left Loki’s head spinning and stomach turning. Loki forced himself to roll over on his side in order to empty what little content he had in his stomach. The only mercy was that the ground he was lying on was soft and cool with the water of pre-morning dew. Loki took his time, gripping and loosening his fingers in the soft grass, as he tried to fight off the worst feeling of disorientation that he had ever known.

His vision was blurred as he tried to take in his surroundings. He was no longer in the cave, that much was a given, but he wasn’t sure where he was. It was a forest of some kind, but not as dense as that of the Western Valley, though the morning fog here was similar. As things came back into focus, though, he saw that things were wrong here. The trees were bare, some were even dead, and the air was cold. That wasn’t right. Asgard was a land of eternal summer, where all life was always thriving and in bloom. Asgard did not have any dead trees, save for those that were destroyed by some other force. And even when the suns were set, the air of Asgard always remained warm enough for its inhabitants. Here, though, Loki’s skin didn’t feel as if it was burning. It was a little warm, to be sure, but not uncomfortably so.

Where am I?

Shouts were suddenly coming from all directions around him, along with the sounds of small explosions. Loki’s head jerked up in attention, his vision swimming, and saw blurred outlines running towards him. The sounds of explosions and banging in rapid procession were growing louder, practically screaming in his ears. Loki threw his hands up to protect himself from the sound, but it just kept coming. The screams grew louder and closer, and he saw trees explode in a ball of fire. The blurred outlines were running closer now, taking on the shape of men, dressed in a fashion that Loki had never seen before and carrying odd black branches.

The men were screaming at each other, shouting orders as they fled and pointed their tools at some unseen force behind them. There were seven of them, running as if the Valkyries were chasing at their heels. Soon they were almost on top of Loki, running past as they continued to shout their
commands, never once seeing the nude youth lying on the ground.

“Captain!” One turned to yell. “Get the hell out of there!”

The man waited a moment for a response, but all he received was some object that went whistling by his head at break-neck speed. The man cursed and raised his black tool, causing little bursts of fire come forth. The man shouted another curse before he turned to flee.

Loki was frozen in horror as the scene unfolded around him. The men were running away from his location now, but the sounds of explosions were coming closer. Loki turned his head back to see some sort of great beast coming through the fog at a slow pace, knocking over the trees in its path. The beast’s long neck pointed towards Loki and spat out a great fireball. Loki managed to roll out of the way before the tree behind him could collapse on top of him and crush him.

The prince decided that he had seen enough here. His senses weren’t one hundred percent yet, but as it suddenly became a matter of life or death, he found the strength to get to his feet and run as fast as he could. There were unseen things whistling by his head, but he didn’t dare turn back and see what it was. The beast was chasing him at a snail’s pace, but its fireballs were burning all around him. So Loki ran and ran and ran…. His lungs were burning, his body screamed in agony, and his heart was somehow racing and fear-stricken, but he kept running.

Until he wasn’t anymore. There was a root sticking out of the ground and he didn’t see it in time. Loki fell forward, his body tumbling several feet on the ground before coming to a stop. More shouts were coming now, closing in on him. There was the sound of a small burst and suddenly Loki felt the worst pain imaginable. He screamed his agony as he looked down to see a hole in his arm, blood seeping from the wound. The beast had somehow gotten him. He tried to move his arm, but the pain radiated throughout his body. All of his previous adrenaline was gone, leaving him there frighten, in pain, and most likely close to death as more men in grey clothing and odd, brimmed caps were closing in on him.

I am going to die.

It was Loki’s final thought before a strange man draped head to toe in blue jumped in front of him. He knelt down before Loki and brandished a great shield. Loki closed his eyes and saw no more.

To his great surprise, Loki actually woke up. His eyes snapped open to reveal a large, empty grey room made of some kind of strange stone. Loki was lying on a narrow bed, his body now covered in what appeared to be a long white tunic, and there were thin vine-like contraptions sticking into his arms. Fearing the worst, Loki moved to pull them out. He managed to get the one plastered to his hand out, but before he could remove anymore, a door burst open. A woman in a short white dress ran towards him, followed closely by a stern looking older man clad in a beige top with colorful medallions and green trousers.

“Don’t pull those out, dear. They’re attached to the I.V. It’s to help keep you hydrated.” The woman grabbed the needle end of the contraption and moved to put it back into his skin, but Loki grabbed hold of the collar of her dress and pushed her away.

“You dare try to attack the son of Laufey!?”

“You stand down, son. Unless you want to ruin this nice young woman’s dress with your brain matter,”
the older man commanded. Loki looked in his direction to see him holding a smaller version of the black tool that he had seen before. It was some kind of weapon, he realized. He thought of the pain he had felt in his arm, how it was more intense than anything he’d ever felt before in his life and felt a tremor go through him at the thought of the small device in the man’s hands being the cause of it. Loki stared the older man down, waiting to see what he would do. When he didn’t lower the weapon, Loki obliged and released his hold on the woman’s dress.

“Right choice, son.” The man put away his gun and the woman fled from the room.

“Where am I?”

“That is classified information at the moment.” The man stepped forward until he was beside Loki’s bedside. His brown eyes ran up and down Loki’s form, not in an appreciative manner, though, but rather as if he were assessing the situation.

“Tell me where I am,” Loki demanded.

“Again, that is on a need to know basis. For the moment, you do not need to know. However, I would like to know exactly who and what you are.”

“What do you mean, ‘what I am’?” It had been a long time since Loki met someone on the realm who did not know him whether through sight or rumor. But wait! “Which realm is this?”

“Realm?” The man repeated.

“Yes,” Loki nodded. “Which realm? It doesn’t feel like Asgard, and there is no possible way that you are one of the light elves of Alfheim… So, where am I? Midgard, then?”

The man looked stoically at Loki for a long time. His features gave no hint as to what he was thinking.

“Now, son, most people would probably be willing to throw you in a straight jacket and cart you off to the nearest looney-bin, but as it is in these past few years I’ve seen some odd things. Mad scientists, evil organizations bent on world-domination, and a scrawny kid from Brooklyn turned into a super soldier by a magic serum. So believe me when that a naked teenage hermaphrodite suddenly dropping in to a top secret war zone doesn’t even phase me at this point. So I will ask again, who and what are you?”

Loki blinked at the man’s bluntness. It took a moment for him to find his voice. “I am Loki, son of Laufey, Prince of Jotunheim, and captive of Asgard.”

The man nodded. “Alright, Loki. Are you hungry?”

The man, Colonel Phillips as he called himself, gave Loki strange, loose green garments similar to his own and took him to a small dining area. There were a few other people there; a slender man with slicked black hair and a small moustache, a taller fair-haired man who stood when they entered, and a woman with reddish hair, form fitting clothes, and men’s trousers. Each of them turned silently in his direction as the Colonel brought Loki into the room. Loki met their stares as he was placed at the head of a metal table. The others took their cue and sat in the chairs around him. Soon, a large plate of meat was place in front of him, and Loki devoured it ravenously.

“Look at the he-she go,” the black haired man laughed. “Kid must have been starving.”
“Howard, please,” the woman chided.

“How long have I been here?” Loki asked between bites of the delicious meat--steak, he would learn the name later.

“We found you in the Black Forest about three days ago. You’ve been unconscious since you were first brought here,” the woman explained.

“Three days?” Loki repeated, eyes going wide. The Allfather was going to kill him, or worse, seclude him to his rooms until Thor’s coronation day.

“Yes,” the woman nodded. “You were very injured when Steve brought you in. Though I must say, you seemed to have healed rather quickly.”

It was true. Loki’s burnt skin was back to its creamy, pale color and the wound in his arm was gone.

“I’ve never seen a bullet wound disappear before. I doubt even the Cap here could manage that,” the black haired man said in astonishment.

“My seidr gives me a quicker healing ability than most. It was exhausted before I arrived here, but the days of rest must have given me back my strength.”

“Seidr?”

“My magic,” Loki explained. “That is the official word for it. I assumed that you mortals knew it.”

“Your magic?”

Loki was beginning to think that the dark haired man was a little slow.

“Try not to blow a gasket, Howard,” Colonel Phillips said from behind him. “Before explanations get underway, I feel the need to remind everyone here that what will be said in this room today is under the strictest confidentiality, and should anyone feel the need to gossip like a bored housewife-- Howard--they will be found guilty of treason and subjected to the maximum punishment set by the U.S. Government. Are we clear?”

Everyone nodded their heads.

“Alright then. Feel free to introduce yourself, son.”

Loki gave these people his name and titles, but unlike the Colonel, their reactions varied from disbelieving to confused.

“Loki, as in the Norse god of mischief?” The woman asked.

“Is that my official title here?” Loki laughed. “I didn’t think that the rumors about me at court had spread down to Midgard just yet.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Howard put his hand up. “You’re telling me that we have a damn Norse god in our hands, and he’s a freaking hermaphrodite teenager?”

“I am not familiar with that word.”

“You got both parts, kid,” he explained, waving a finger towards Loki’s crotch.
“Stark, please,” the fair haired man groaned. “Do you have to be so crude?”

“I’m just stating the obvious.”

“No, he is correct. I do possess both genitalia,” Loki shrugged. He had this explained to him so many times that it was all old hat to him. “It is a feature of my Jotun heritage. We are of one sex, capable of being both or neither.”

“So… you’re a Jotun god?” Howard asked.

“There’s only one God, Howard, and I’m pretty sure he doesn’t look like that,” the fair haired man said. “No offense.”

“Hey, call him whatever you want. But the fact of the matter is that we have someone out of mythology sitting at the dinner table.”

“Mythology?” Loki repeated. “I was under the impression that you mortals worship the Aesir.”

“Not for a several centuries,” Colonel Phillips said. “Norse mythology and Viking raids fell out of fashion about a thousand years ago.”

“A thousand? But Thor was just on a hunt to this realm three moons ago. He likes to make a show for the mortals while he’s here to remind them of their place in Yggdrasil and ensure the worship of the Aesir.”

“Loki… it is 1943,” the woman told him.

1943… Loki let that sink in for a moment while the others waited expectantly. He wasn’t sure how the mortals kept track of the cycles of their years, but he had to imagine that considerable time had passed between Thor’s hunt on Midgard and now, if they were considering them to be creatures of mythology. Then the realization hit him, *The Cave of Time*. He had traveled to another realm, but unlike the Bifrost, the cave brought him not only through space, but through time itself. Oh, this was just too wonderful.

“How do we even know that he’s telling the truth,” the blonde one asked. “I’m not calling you a liar, but you did suffer some trauma out there. It’d be natural if things got a little mixed up in your mind.”

“Oh come on, Steve, you saw my findings. His body temperature is too low for any living human, he has no known blood type, and he has a freaking vagina!”

“Howard, not in front of Peggy,” Steve said sternly.

“Why not?” The woman, Peggy, asked. “I have one, Steve. All women do.”

“I… I know. I-it’s just that… well…”

Loki couldn’t help but roll his eyes at the mortal’s display. He was so transparent it hurt. Peggy, on the other hand, was a bit better at hiding her emotions, but Loki could see that she was having fun making Steve blush.

“If you three are done arguing over the anatomy of our friend here, I’d like to get back to the matter at hand,” the Colonel interrupted and everyone went silent. “Good, now, let’s assess the situation at hand. Last year, officer Johann Schmidt and his army invaded a castle in Tønsberg, Norway. These men decimated the town in search of this,” the colonel dropped an open envelope
 unto the table, revealing a black and white photograph of a glowing cube.

“Local legend has it that the castle held the jewel of Odin’s treasure room, also known as the Tesseract. Schmidt and his men are now believed to be in possession of this object and are using it to create weapons for the special unit known as HYDRA. Now, since we’re dealing with something out of mythology, I figured that Loki here—provided that he is who he claims—may offer us some insight on what it is that we’re dealing with.”

All eyes looked to Loki and the boy suddenly never felt more important or self-conscious in his whole life. Loki swallowed down a lump in his throat and looked over what was written in the file about the Tesseract.

“I don’t know this object personally,” Loki told them in a low voice. “If it was, as you said, the jewel of Odin’s treasure room, then I would have never come into contact with it. Though I know almost every inch of the palace of Asgard, there is one room which I could never go nor would I risk going into, and that is the weapons vault.”

“So you don’t know what it is?” Howard asked, annoyance obvious from his tone.

“I didn’t say that,” Loki snapped back. “What I know of the weapons vault is mostly through hearsay, but what I can gather is that a majority of the items stored there were either gifted to the Aesir, stolen from other worlds, or created from a source of powerful magic. Odin and Thor’s weapons of choice, Mjolnir and Gungnir, were once held in the vault, as well as the Destroyer, Odin’s machine that he is able to control and which can bring a whole city to ruin within a matter of minutes. Jotunheim’s Casket of Ancient Winters resides there,” he said bitterly. “It is a limitless supply of magical energy and was used on Jotunheim to control the harsh climate of the realm, but can also be used as a great weapon… Other weapons include the Infinity Gauntlet, capable of giving the wearer god-like powers; the Orb of Agamatto, which gives clairvoyance; and the Warlock’s Eye, another powerful weapon.

“Each of these things single-handedly have the power to bring a realm to ruin, given that the right user operates it. So if this Tesseract was the jewel of the weapons vault, then I’m afraid that you’re in quite the predicament.”

Loki watched as the others as his words sunk in. He could see fear and worry in Steve and Peggy’s eyes. Curiosity and something close to excitement in Howard’s, but the colonel’s features gave away nothing at all.

“What is the weapon’s source and function?” Howard finally asked.

“I can’t tell you precisely what its function is, as I’ve never handled it before, but judging from the light signature from this picture, I’d say it comes form a source of immensely powerful seidr. More powerful than Odin’s, if I had to guess. Have any of you been near enough to it to see what color it was emanating?”

“I have,” Steve speaks up. “Well, I’ve seen the weapons that its powered. It gave off a sort of white-bluish light.”

“Definitely not Odin’s seidr, then. His signature is more of a golden hue.”

“Signature? What signature?” Steve asked.

Loki wasn’t going to get anywhere if he had to keep stopping to explain, so instead he sat back in his chair and focused. The three days rest did indeed do him good, as he could feel his seidr
thrumming through his body. It was easy enough to call on it and watch everyone’s eyes widen in amazement as the wisps of green energy danced at his fingertips.

“Each seidmenn or seidkonur possesses a unique signature with their seidr. Sometimes it manifests itself through the color of the energy. Mine is green, Odin’s is golden.” Loki sent the wisps of green light dancing towards Steve. Peggy laughed when he tried to brush it away. “Any more questions?”

“Yeah,” Howard spoke up. “So, what the hell are you exactly?”

Loki sighed and rubbed his temple. This was going to be a long story.

After a few hours, Loki had told his whole story. He gave them the abbreviated version of the history of the realms and Yggdrasil. He told them what he knew of the biology of his race and the Aesir, as well as the bad blood between the two. Often throughout his story, the man Howard Stark would interrupt with some inept question concerning his duality of sexes or a dirty comment. Thankfully, though, Peggy and Steve were quick to silence him so that Loki could continue with his tale. They were curious about him, it was only natural. They wanted to know all about the world he had come from and the kinds of people that lived there; what sort of technologies and philosophies they possessed, or whether or not they could be considered peaceful.

He didn’t skim over Jotunheim’s involvement with Midgard during the great war, but he didn’t let the concerned look of the mortals bother him. He had no involvement with it and he wasn’t going to apologize for what his species had done. Loki told them about how Jotunheim sought to annex Midgard for themselves, how mortals were killed in the process, and about how Asgard put a stop to them. They seemed to be on the side of the Aesir when he informed them of the details, but he didn’t let that concern him. They weren’t exactly an unbiased party in this situation. When he told them about what the war cost Jotunheim, though, he was met with voices of concern regarding the decay of his birth realm. Next he told them about his life as a hostage of Asgard, of his betrothal to Thor and Odin’s designs for both him and Jotunheim. Their expressions softened after that, and Loki found himself hating the looks of pity he received. Except from Howard, of course. He just mumbled something along the lines of “should have guessed” under his breath, but was soon met with a swift kick from Peggy under the table.

Eventually he got up to the tale of how he came to be among them. He told them about the wager with Thor and discovering the cave. He told them about being pulled through the strange vortex that landed him in the forest and his confusion and fear about his surroundings.

“Just what have you mortals been up to in all this time?”

“The world’s gone to shit, son,” was Colonel Phillips’ response. “One man got it into his mind what the idea of the superior race is, and anyone who doesn’t fit the bill has to either get out of the way or be run down.”

“We have this man here,” Steve began, “who is very, very bad. He and people like him have decided what their idea of the perfect race is, and what is inferior. He started by gaining leadership of his country and the trust of his people. Once he had that, he wanted more and more power. He started invading other countries, killing innocent people, and began one of the worst organized genocides known to man… In the lightest possible terms, he’s a bully; hurting the weak and defenseless while pushing his view of how the world should be on others… But we’re going to stop him.”

Loki nodded slowly, absorbing Steve’s words. He knew a thing or two about megalomaniacs and the kind of destruction they could cause. “You sound confident.”
“Because I am,” he sat up straighter. “I don’t like bullies. So I won’t stand by and let them get away with making innocent people suffer.”

“…I wish you all the luck in the world then.” Loki smiled sadly.

“Loki,” Peggy said, “do you think you will be able to help us? If the Tesseract is as powerful as you think it is, then we need to get it away from Schmidt as soon as possible. We could use someone of your knowledge to aid us.”

It was a tempting offer. Loki had to admit that he hadn’t been this comfortable in a room of strangers in… well perhaps ever. For everyone on Asgard, Loki was known as the mischievous little Frost Giant, fostered under the care of the good King and Queen, and bride-to-be of the golden prince. He’d never had anyone actually value what he had to say, well other than Hermes. He looked into these mortals’ eyes and he saw their sincerity and their need for help. He also knew that if he could show them just how powerful he really was, then they wouldn’t see him as the ergi seidmann that everyone else did. They would value his help and maybe even appreciate him… but Loki knew he couldn’t stay.

“I would love nothing more than to help you, truly, but I cannot stay.”

“You’re not exactly authorized to leave our custody just yet,” the colonel threatened.

“That isn’t up to you,” Loki answered. “I need to leave before Odin can find me here. I don’t think Heimdall can see through time, but Odin has his ways.”

“So if big bad Allfather comes, what would we be expecting?” Howard shrugged. “More fancy magic tricks?”

“Mortal, manifesting energy comes as natural as breathing to a seidmann. If you wanted to see my true power, then continue to waggle your tongue.”

“No need to threaten, now,” Howard raised his arms in surrender. “Just asking a question.”

“I am not threatening, just merely informing. Should you find the Tesseract, I suggest that you throw it into your deepest ocean and pray that no one ever finds it. For if Odin knew that you had one of his possessions, let alone one of his most powerful weapons, then your realm would be torn apart… The Aesir do like to horde their treasures so fiercely.”

Of that, Loki knew all too well.

“Thank you, Colonel Phillips, for your hospitality and I do hope that you and your people will come out victorious in your battles. Howard Stark, you are a most infuriating creature and the people in your company are nothing short of saints for tolerating you. Lady Peggy, you are a strong and capable woman, and I have every faith in you and your cause. Sir Steve… thank you for saving my life. I don’t care for bullies either, so thank you for standing up against them. There should be more in the world with your courage.”

“Are you sure that you have to go?” Steve asked, standing from the table as Loki did. “You said that you’re a hostage to these people, and from the sounds of things, you’re going to be treated worse than a second class citizen if you go back.”

“You have all been too kind to me here,” Loki said. “That is why I must go back. I wouldn’t want to see harm come upon you because of me.”

Steve nodded then, finally understanding. “Just know that if you ever need any help or an ally,
we’re here.”

“I will remember, thank you. Oh, and Steve?”

“Yes?”

“Just tell her already.”

Before Steve could respond, Loki closed his eyes and quickly recalled the image of the forest. He was terrified to go back there, but he knew if he had to get back to Asgard, then he had to retrace his steps. When he opened his eyes, he was between two enormous trees. Now that he could see it clearly, Loki couldn’t help but note the similarities between this Black Forest and the woods of the Western Valley. Here, as well as back there, the trees were packed closely together, not allowing much sunlight to penetrate through to the forest floor. Here as well, there didn’t seem to be much sign of life, whether in the form of people or animals. Though, he didn’t know how much of that he could attribute to the location itself, or to what had occurred here not three days ago.

Images of running desperately for his life from the giant beast and uniformed men began to run through Loki’s mind. It was ridiculous, he thought. He had been trained in combat for years and his seidr made him a force to be reckoned with…but none of that mattered on that day. All of Loki’s previous training had abandoned him in the moments when he needed it most and he was nothing more than a terrified boy who was afraid to die.

If any of the Aesir had seen the way he had run, then his title of ergi would have no doubt become a permanent staple to his name. Warriors did not run from battle, no matter how terrifying it may be. Warriors stand and fight, unafraid to die. While Loki still believed them to be idiots for doing so, he could begin to see some sort of twisted nobility to it. Look at Captain Rogers. All of his men had turned to flee from an unwinnable battle, but he was the last one to leave. He faced his foes with confidence and bravery, and still sought to protect some unknown boy with nothing more than just a shield for a weapon. If ever there were one worthy for the halls of Valhalla, it would be him…but that was not why he had done it.

That was the difference between Steve and the warriors of Asgard, like Thor. He did not come into this frightening battle for the hope that one day songs would be sung of his name and deeds. No. He did it because he wanted to fight against the evils in this realm and to help those who needed him. Loki had truly meant it when he said that there should be more men with his courage. He wished that he were one such man.

A snap of a twig brought Loki back into himself. He looked around, nervous that the uniformed men had returned. When he looked around, though, he saw nothing. Still, just as a precaution, Loki cast his spell to render himself unseen before he set out to find the spot where he had landed. It didn’t take long to find it, as he followed the little shells of metal that he saw spill from the mortals’ weapons. Eventually, he came upon the spot where he believed he had arrived, the large patch of soft grass. Loki noticed something he hadn’t the first time. The patch of grass was inside of a ring of mushrooms; the fairy rings. Loki had seen illustrations of them before in the Alfheim texts. They were said to be the result of when the elves and fairies of Alfheim danced in their rituals. What Alfheim’s creatures had to do with the cave in Asgard, Loki had no clue, but he would solve that mystery another time. For now, he stepped back inside of the ring and immediately felt the pull.

Then he was back in the cave. The same blue light illuminated the cavern, the same bag of runes lie scattered on the floor, and the same nine circular boulders stood against the walls. Loki could almost believe it all to be some sort of strange dream if it weren’t for the garments he was wearing. The loose green trousers were torn and dirty, as was the white undershirt he wore. They were all
that Colonel Phillips had to offer him as he didn’t have anything else on hand. It was real, he wasn’t insane.

“The Cave of Time,” Loki laughed. “I was just looking for a bilgesnipe.”

Loki laughed hysterically for some time. He was still laughing when he teleported himself back to where he had left his supplies in the days before, thankful that it was night again in Asgard. He laughed as he changed back into his discarded clothing and shoved his new ones into the rucksack as a keepsake. And he was laughing manically when he returned to his room in the palace.

He was shaken out of his laughter, though, at the sound of a familiar screech.

“LOKI!”

The boy whipped his head around to see Hulda standing in his room, literally still frozen to the spot where he had left her. Loki was frozen in place from the shock of the sight.

“Loki Laufeyjarson, you release me right now!” His nurse demanded.

Snapping out of his shock, Loki quickly uttered the words to melt the ice around Hulda’s feet. His nurse fell forward onto her knees, her body shivering from the cold. Loki knelt down to help her, which she accepted begrudgingly.

“How long were you there?”

“Since you trapped me, you little viper!” She snapped.

“What do you mean? None of the servants sent for help while I was gone?”

“None have come by today. You don’t have lessons today and there was no need for any servants to be called. I have been trapped there all night!”

“All night?” Loki was confused. He was gone for days… wasn’t he?

“Yes, all night!” She screeched. “Look at my feet! If I lose them to frost, then I will personally ensure that you are locked away in the dungeons!”

“Oh calm yourself, woman,” Loki said with a roll of his eyes. “Your feet are fine, there is no sign of frostbite to them. Just go to Eir later for a remedy to make sure there is no infection.”

“That is all that you have to say!?” She screamed, disbelieving. “Loki, you disobeyed my orders, trapped me here to keep me from stopping you, and were gone who knows where for a full day. What if something had happened to you? It would have killed me.”

“I am fine, Hulda,” he assured her, placing his hand on her shoulder. He was only slightly hurt when she flinched away from it. “I am sorry for making you worry. What I did was foolish and selfish, I’ve realized that. I should have listened to you and never gone, but my pride got in the way of my reasoning. I went as far as I could before I realized that you were right, and I should not have put myself in harm’s way so foolishly. I am also sorry for leaving you like I did. I honestly thought that someone would free you before I returned… Do you forgive me?”

Hulda’s arms were crossed over her chest and her features displayed a deadly scowl. She knew that she shouldn’t believe a word of what the boy was saying. Honestly, after all these years, she should be able to see through the lack of sincerity in his words. Unfortunately, Loki’s green eyes, when wide and brimming with tears, were impossible to resist. Eventually, she felt her resolve fade and
she forgave the boy. Loki hugged her for good measure.

Once she had gone, though, Loki flopped down onto his bed and thought about his situation. He had been gone for days on Midgard, but the power that fueled the cave brought him back to the exact moment that he left… This was very good information to have. He would need to find out more about the cave, though he wasn’t sure where he would begin to look. He had never read of it in any of his tomes about Asgard’s history, nor had he ever heard rumor of it. But it was there, and from the looks of it, it was an ancient relic of the realm. There must be information on it somewhere.

Loki also thought about his wager with Thor. At this point, he was too exhausted from his travels to even begin to track down Thor and his company, nor did he really care anymore about proving himself to them. He had concerns about what Thor would require from him for his forfeit, but he would deal with this when the time came. He thought about Steve Rogers again and the man’s sense of nobility and bravery. When the time comes, he would face Thor the way the Captain faced his foes. Brave and resilient.

Thor and his band returned two weeks after Loki’s adventure. Loki said nothing when Thor smugly presented him a scale of the bilgesnipe the size of his fist. He said nothing when Thor mocked his seidr again, as well as making insinuations about his cowardice. Loki was silent when Thor reminded him of their wager and told him that the two would meet alone in the gardens after the suns had set.

The prince of Jotunheim had no words as he walked into the gardens well after the suns had gone down and the residents of the city had gone to sleep. He had no screams or protests when he felt strong arms wrap around his waist from behind him in the dark. Promises of acts so vile were whispered into his ear as Thor’s calloused hands pawed at his chest. He was frozen still when he felt Thor’s lips against his neck, teeth nibbling lightly at his pulse point while those hands moved under his tunic. Nails scraped lightly against his smooth flesh and fingers lightly teased his nipple. Thor didn’t comment on Loki’s lack of reaction, and merely attributed it to the other prince’s naturally frigid demeanor.

Loki didn’t fight when Thor removed their clothing and forced heated kisses onto the younger man. He didn’t voice his disgust when he felt the other hammer of Thor press wantonly against his thigh. When Thor gently placed Loki on his knees before him, he did as Thor instructed and suckled at the prince’s swollen head. He followed Thor’s commands of “harder,” “faster,” and “more tongue” as the golden prince moaned his pleasure, fingers tangled in black hair to force himself deeper into that beautiful mouth. Loki was still when the prince pulled back to spill his release on the Jotun’s lovely face, marking him with his seed.

When he kissed Loki deeply again, he pushed him gently onto his back as his hands trailed down his waist and between his legs to part his thighs. Loki’s eyes were staring straight up into the night sky, unblinking as Thor kissed his way down his body, stopping briefly to lavish his nipple with attention. There was no resistance when Thor’s head came to rest between his legs, bypassing his flaccid cock for something much more to the prince’s liking. Only when he pressed a kiss to his mound did Loki make any kind of reaction. A tongue flicked out, switching from long strokes against his folds to little licks at his clitoris. Thor grinned against Loki’s skin as he heard the little trickster breathe out in frantic gasps and those long fingers curled into his hair. He wished to do more, to sheath himself deep inside of his betrothed and make him scream his pleasure, but he was bound by his duty to keep Loki pure until their union. For now, though, he would take his pleasure in forcing him to come undone.
Under the skilled ministrations of Thor’s tongue, Loki shivered and threw his head back in release. His body quivered as Thor’s tongue continued to lick and penetrate him through his orgasm. He didn’t stop for some time. When Thor finally pulled away he pounced on Loki, stealing the breath in his lungs with a hungry, deep kiss.

Thor was grinning ear to ear when he said, “Come now, little giant. That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Loki said nothing at all. His eyes were unfocused as Thor stared down at him, removed from the scene at hand…

Of course, this was because Loki was not in the gardens at all. In the darkest corner of Kvasir’s library, the true prince of Jotunheim sat huddled on the floor with a single candle burning before him and piles of tomes surrounding him. Loki didn’t have a care in the world as he thumbed through the pages of Histories of the Realm and Mysteries and Rituals of the Ljósálfar in search for any information about the Cave of Time.

You see, in the time that it took for Thor and his merry band to track and kill the bilgesnipe Loki had been wearing himself ragged trying to finally perfect his doppelganger illusion. He had long ago managed to create copies of himself, but they had left much to be desired. At first, they were transparent and unmoving. Over time he had been able to solidify their forms and have them mimic his motions, but they would dissolve upon touch. That had taken much longer to remedy. It took so long for him to find a way for his copies to retain their solidity, and it exhausted much seidr from him, but the result had paid off. What he had spent the last two weeks on, though, was getting his copies to respond to stimulation. Beforehand, if one were to prick its skin, the copy would look at the mark, but wouldn’t feel or react to it accordingly. Loki worked tirelessly until he managed to find a way for the copy to respond to the feelings of touch, whether through pain or pleasure. In his rush he had to forego giving them the capability of speech, but he didn’t believe that Thor would mind.

Loki did not lie when he said that he admired Steve Rogers and his sense of bravery even in the most hopeless situations. Nor did he lie when he thought that he would like to be more like the Captain. Loki, however, wasn’t an idiot. He knew that while giving a demanding situation your all and still failing could be admirable, it was often better to rely on cunning and wit to ensure success. After all, heroes end up in songs and lore because they met their untimely end through some foolish act or another. Smart men lived to tell the tales themselves. Loki did hope that Captain Rogers would be successful in his battles, but the man had a natural heroic impulse. It is likely that, whenever Loki returns to Midgard through his secret passage, the Captain will have met his demise.

Suddenly, a gust of wind blew out Loki’s candle. There were no windows or doors anywhere near by, so Loki knew that there was only one source of the sudden wind. He laughed to himself as he raised his palm up and conjured a small ball of fire. Just as he expected…

“Lovely Loki,” Hermes grinned in the light of his flame. “You look as if you have a secret to tell.”

“Oh, I have much and more to show you, my friend.” Loki answered. “How do you fancy a trip across all of time?”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry this took so long to get out, and that it feels a bit rushed through. School has
started back, so that on top of some bad RL situations has gotten me a little behind. I will try to get more out soon, though :) 

Thanks for reading.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry for this taking so long! School has been kicking my ass and I've had a hell of a hard time writing thing. Hopefully you will like it, though. Next update may not be for a little while as I've got two research papers to work on, but hopefully it won't be too long. Anyway, thank you for reading.

A trip across all of time… That was what Loki had promised Hermes, but he never expected the grand adventure that awaited them. Under the cover of darkness, while Thor was still whispering lewd words to his doppelganger, Loki took Hermes to his secret cave in the mountains. Hermes was wary to go with him at first, as he had been sent on urgent business from Olympus to deal directly with Odin, but he couldn’t deny Loki something that brought such a lovely smile to his face.

Using his seidr, Loki was able to bring the two back to the center of the cave, to the pillar that held the sacred runes. Hermes had watched Loki with a brow raised skeptically as the other young man cast his strange runes and whispered words to them. Loki himself was still not quite sure of how the process worked, so when the runes asked what it was that he sought, he merely answered with “adventure.” This time, the first stone had rolled away, revealing the dark entrance hidden behind it. Loki didn’t even bother with explanations before he grabbed hold of Hermes’ wrist and jumped inside.

The journey through the vortex was much as Loki had remembered, though he was comforted by the fact of knowing that it would eventually end. If Hermes was frightened, Loki wasn’t able to tell. Much like before, all sound was absorbed in this space, leaving the traveler alone in the closing darkness with only their thoughts for company. That is, until they were mercifully spat out onto the hard ground. Loki had braced himself for the impact, and this time he was able to simply roll over and laugh. Hermes, however, had not fared the trip so well. The messenger was currently curled up on his side, releasing the contents of his stomach.

“You’re a bastard,” he said with a hoarse voice.

“You get used to it after a while,” Loki shrugged.

The younger man sat up to take in their surroundings, and found himself greatly disappointed when he recognized the terrain of the Western Forest. They were still in Asgard, then. As to when they were there, though, he hadn’t the faintest idea. It must have been some great time before his present, though, because where before the forest was mostly dead, the trees were alive and an abundant amount of fauna was present. The canopy of trees managed to protect Loki from the harsher of the suns’ rays, but he still felt the familiar uncomfortable warmth in his skin.

“Well, now what do we do?” Hermes asked, raising himself up to his knees.

Loki was about to open his mouth to suggest that they at least travel into the capital to get a sense of the timeline, but before he could speak, both men felt the ground beneath them begin to shake. Without giving thought to the danger, Hermes grabbed Loki by the wrist and pulled him further into the forest as the vibrations of the ground grew more violent. A piercing cry was heard
throughout the forest, followed by what seemed like the deep rumbling of laughter. Behind the
boys, trees were slowly being torn from the earth by their roots. No, they were being pushed over
by a very long, muscular arm. Loki and Hermes ducked down as a creature of enormous size made
its way through the forest, knocking over all that stood in its path. The screaming continued as it
made its way past the two hidden men.

“What is that thing!?” Hermes exclaimed.

“I haven’t a clue.”

He wanted to know, though. So Loki pushed Hermes’s protective hand off of his shoulder and
transformed into his magpie form. He took to the air, ignoring his friend’s protests and followed
after the creature. Above the tree-line he could just make out the top of the creature’s head, as well
as something that looked as if it were thrashing near it. He swooped in for a closer look and saw
what looked to be dark, charred skin. He flew in closer and saw that the dark tint was actually a
deep blue, containing raised lines that were cooking in Asgard’s twin suns. Another Jotun!

Loki had never seen another of his kind before, aside from the dead builder. He perched himself on
a tree branch ahead of the Jotun to get a better look at his kin. The Jotun was enormous, the top of
his head standing at equal height to the tallest treetop in the forest. His arms and legs were as thick
as trunks, muscular and bulging, exposing the raised lines of his linage. If this was common for the
Jotnar, then Loki was indeed small for his race. He tried not to feel too self-conscious about the
fact. The face of his kin, though, was not what he expected. The face looked hard to the touch, as if
it were carved from ice, with sunken cheeks, a broad nose, and sunken eyes. The Jotun’s teeth were
clenched, obviously trying not to show his discomfort in being burnt in this land’s suns. Sharp,
pointed bluish teeth were revealed behind thin lips. Around his skull were what appeared to be
horns, circling and framing his head like a ram. That was odd… Loki didn’t have any horns, at
least he didn’t think he did. It was hard to tell in just the two times he was in his true form. If he did
dive any horns, would they look as large as those? Or would they be smaller to fit his build?

“Release me now!” A scream brought Loki from his thoughts back to the scene at hand. He saw
the Jotun laugh and turn his head to his left. There was something over his shoulder. Loki flew in
closer to examine it.

“Release me at once, Þjazi!” A woman’s voice cried. Loki flew a circle round the Jotun and his
captive, seeing a beautiful young woman with long golden hair flung over the Jotun’s shoulder like
a sack of flour. There was something oddly familiar about the woman, but Loki couldn’t place it.

“Now, now my dear. No need to struggle.” The Jotun laughed. “I do not intend to harm you.”

“If you take me from Asgard you will doom us all!”

“You exaggerate, my lovely goddess. Your garden will still grow without you to tend to it. The
Aesir will be fine without you. And you, my love, will be the crown jewel of my possessions.”
Þjazi laughed.

“The garden will not live without me. Without the apples, all of Asgard will wilt and die!” She
insisted. “You risk a war by taking me.”

The mention of the apples is what causes Loki to recognize her. It is Idunn, though much younger
than he’s ever seen her, keeper of Asgard’s golden apples and giver of youth. Well, perhaps that is
a bit of an exaggeration. The power of her apples does not keep the Aesir eternally young—Odin is
a testament to that-- more it slows the effects of aging, increasing the longevity of the lives of the
Aesir. The power of the apples is something that only Idunn possess, so Loki knows that she is not
lying in her hysteric warnings. The Jotun, Þjazi, just seems to not care.

“Yes, they will storm the frozen lands of Þrymheimr withered and feeble. It would hardly make for fun sport, but it should provide a good laugh.”

If Loki could, he would laugh at the Jotun’s cockiness. He had to give the giant credit, though. The man was walking unabashedly through the enemy realm and was abscinding with one of the most crucial goddess of the realm with seemingly no fear of being caught. Something like this took a great deal of self-assuredness… or idiocy. Loki hadn’t decided which just yet. He knew that whatever Þjazi’s plans was, though, it was doomed to fail. He’d toured Idunn’s garden and spoken with the woman herself since she was a child, so no doubt she would be rescued before too long.

Having satisfied his curiosity, Loki turned back to find Hermes. When he flew back to where he left his friend, though, he didn’t see Hermes. Rather, there was an old man, hunched over and speaking with a frantic looking younger man. Loki flew in for a closer look and to hear their conversation.

“Please!” The young man exclaimed as he grabbed hold of the old man’s hands. “Please, that beast stole my beloved. I have to find her.”

Ah, a young Bragi then. Loki thought the sklad to be even more handsome without his full beard. Bragi was looking desperately at the old man as if he somehow had the power to help him. Loki wondered why Odin was not here, dealing with the matter himself, but the old man voiced the question for him.

“I am just a simple traveler, young man, new to your realm. I don’t know if I can help you retrieve your beloved. Where is your king, the mightiest and wisest of the Aesir?”

“My lord Odin is preoccupied with his travels in Midgard. The Einherjar will not act without Odin’s command and no other will assist me. Please, dear traveler! I am alone in my quest and in dire need of help!”

“Poor child,” the old man said sympathetically, placing a hand on Bragi’s shoulder. “I will do what I can for you, but I cannot promise success.”

“Whatever you can do,” Bragi nodded, understanding. He must have truly been desperate if he had to resort to begging the elderly for help. “If anyone could bring her back to me, I will ensure that they will be rewarded with a bushel of my wife’s golden apples.”

Loki watched as the old man’s eyes widened with sudden interest. “A reward like that would be something that an old man such as myself would be fool to pass over. I vow to return your beloved, lord Bragi, provided that you uphold your word.”

“I shall,” Bragi nodded enthusiastically. “You have my word, sir. Thank you.”

“You are most welcome. Now, return to your home and I shall bring her to you.”

Bragi thanked the old man a few more times before turning his heels to return to Asgard. Handsome though he may be, Loki always figured that Bragi was a coward. There wasn’t a man more eloquent in Asgard, who could spin a more beautiful tale of epics and deeds of brave heroes past, but give the man a sword and he’d most likely grasp it by the blade. And Loki was the one thought to be ergi? The Aesir made no sense.

Once Bragi had gone the old man smiled and turned to face the tree Loki was perched in. His eyes wandered up until they landed on the little magpie hidden in the branches. The old man smiled
then and let his glamour drop, revealing Loki’s mischievous friend.

“You can come down now, little bird,” Hermes called to him. “We are alone once more.”

Loki shifted back to his natural appearance, but chose to stay on his branch. The heat of the afternoon was stifling even in the protection of his shade. He didn’t think he could manage being out in the open like Þjazi.

“I see you’ve met Asgard’s dear sklad Bragi.”

“Yes, though we’ve met once before, when we first arrived in this realm. He and Apollo spent the evening trying to best each other in contests of poetry. I was ready to put a knife through my ear after the fourth verse.”

“You wouldn’t be the first. So dear Bragi is offering a reward for the return of his beloved?”

“That seems to be the agreement. You didn’t happen to see which way she went, did you?”

“You want to go after her?” Loki asked, raising his eyebrow. “Why?”

“I could give you some long winded speech about nobility and the triumph of true love, but I know you to be a cynical bastard, so I will instead tell you the truth. Aside from your king’s prized weapon’s vault, Idunn’s garden is one of the most protected places in Asgard. Not even I could penetrate the magical barriers surrounding it. Now that the opportunity to have a bushel of her apples has presented itself, I can hardly allow it to pass by.”

“You are immortal by your nature, a god in your own right. What could you possibly want with Idunn’s apples?”

“Just the pleasure of stealing them,” he smiled. “Now come, my friend. We’ll make a game of it. Whoever retrieves her first shall take the reward for themselves.”

Before Loki could give an answer, Hermes took to the air with his unnatural speed. Though Loki was in no rush to do something for the Aesir, he supposed that he should keep an eye on Hermes. Also, Idunn had been kind to him, in her own way. She was not one to show any kind of physical affection to him, but when he would visit her gardens as a small child she would always answer his questions with a fond smile and, if the mood struck her, she would allow Loki to take one of her prized flowers as a treat. The apples, though, were always out of his reach. He never knew why until he learned the truth of his heritage. The apples of rejuvenation would be wasted to a Frost Giant, a creature unworthy of the goddess’s gift. Always unworthy…

Loki snarled as he shifted his form and took to the air after his friend. He was not hard to find, fortunately. Þjazi had not gotten far from where Loki had left him and Idunn was still screaming her lungs out to be released. Loki could see Hermes circling the two in the air, Þjazi swatting at him as if he were just a small fly. As the Jotun prince flew in closer, he could hear Hermes taunting Þjazi, seemingly trying distract the giant and drop his guard.

“Foolish giant, what do you hope to accomplish by taking the fair maid?”

“Off with you, Aesir!” Þjazi snapped. “I have come for my payment due, and no oath-breaker will deny me what is rightfully mine!”

“I find it a great insult to my people to be likened to such a tribe as the Aesir,” Hermes said, and Loki was not quite sure whether or not he was speaking with seriousness. “Their sense of culture and wit leaves much to be desired. So tell me, giant, where do you hail from?”
The giant stood at his full height and grinned maliciously at Hermes. “I am Þjazi, great lord of Þrymheimr, and warrior of Jotunheim.”

“Ah, Jotunheim,” Hermes smiled and moved to hover in front of Þjazi. “I know of Jotunheim. Beautiful world, even lovelier people… Tell me, Þjazi of Jotunheim, what oaths were broken that you felt you were owed this lovely and frightened maid?”

At this, Þjazi practically growled and tightened his grip on the goddess. “Odin and that fool Hoenir… They were trespassing through my lands, hunting my game. When they killed an ox of my herd Hoenir tried to deny me my claim to the beast. We fought and, as the fool begged for his life, he promised me in return the beautiful Idunn. When I came to collect, though, Hoenir had fled to Midgard with Odin! He thought he could just forget about what was owed to me!? Not likely. Idunn is mine now.”

So Hoenir was one of the reasons behind this? Loki had only met Hoenir a handful of times, not really enough to make a full assessment. What he did know of the man was that he was close to Odin, honored greatly for his battle prowess, but was not known for his cleverness or intelligence. Which most likely explained the current predicament for unfortunate Idunn. Loki wasn’t quite sure what upset him more at the moment. The Aesir’s constant oath-breaking to the Jotnar, or their constant bargaining of their women.

“While I do agree that you were cheated, my friend, I believe that the lady belongs only to herself. And she does not seem to wish to go with you.”

“Her wishes concern me not. Now move aside before I crush you in my palm!”

“You would not be the first giant who has attempted such a thing,” Hermes laughed. “Let me tell you the tale of how I slew Argus Panoptes. You see, my father once fell for the mortal woman Io and my stepmother Hera was not fond of his liaisons. So she turned poor Io into a cow and…”

As Hermes began his rant, Loki saw his opportunity. Þjazi simply stood there, confused as his friend began his lengthy tale, his grip on Idunn slowly loosening. Loki flew in swiftly and landed on the opposite shoulder of Þjazi, contemplating his next move. Knowing Hermes, his friend’s rant would buy him at least five minutes. He could not carry Idunn as she was while he was in his magpie form, nor could he risk changing shape while resting on Þjazi. Loki had never before tried to conjure any spells while his forms were changed, but now seemed a good time as any. He concentrated as hard as he could, blocking out the sound of his friend’s rambling voice, until he felt the familiar feeling spreading through his veins. He stared at the frightened Idunn and focused his energies on shifting her form into another bird. The relief he felt at seeing her enveloped by the green signature of his seidr was soon diminished when instead of a magpie, Idunn transformed into an acorn and fell to the ground.

Þjazi noticed instantly and turned to search for the goddess. The Norns appeared to be on Loki’s side, though, as the Jotun took no notice to the small bird perched on his shoulder, nor the tiny golden acorn at his large feet. As Þjazi growled and spewed all forms of curses at Hermes, Loki swooped down, took the acorn into his talons, and set off for the palace. Hermes would be fine on his own… most likely.

He found Bragi nervously pacing the gardens, twisting his hands and periodically looking out towards the horizon, waiting for the old man to return with his beloved. He could not approach Bragi straight away, for he knew the man. Though Bragi did not know him now, he would no doubt be confused to one day look upon Odin’s stolen prize and wonder why he shared the same
face as his wife’s rescuer. So Loki hid himself before he shifted back into his natural form. He tucked the acorn into his tunic before he turned his attention back to himself. Though Loki was an expert in transfiguration, his only shape-shifting forms included animals. He had yet to master changing his face into another. Why would he want to when his own face worked so well for him? Out of necessity he attempted it, though. Unfortunately the best he could do was to subtly change his features. His onyx colored hair turned to a deep red, the color of the flame. Green eyes were transformed into a pale blue, pristine skin became littered with freckles, as if kissed by the sun. Loki still looked like himself, and yet he did not. It would have to do.

He appeared suddenly before Bragi, causing the god to let loose a very frightened gasp. Loki rolled his eyes and retrieved the acorn from his tunic.

“Who are you?” Bragi asked. “And how did you enter the gardens?”

“I am the Skywalker,” Loki replied easily. “There is no place in the realms in which I cannot enter. I have come now in order to receive my payment due.”

“What payment is that, Skywalker?”

“A bushel of Idunn’s apples in exchange for the return of your beloved.”

“How did you know about that?” Bragi asked, lifting an eyebrow quizzically. “I have only offered this reward to one man, one much older than yourself.”

“It was my understanding that the offer stood for anyone who could bring back your beloved. Shall I return her to become the bride of Þjazi in the realm of ice?”

“No!” He answered quickly. “No, please… I- I will give them to you. Just please… Where is she?”

“My reward first, lord Bragi. I know that the oaths of the Aesir are not easily upheld. Before your wife is returned to you, you shall give me what I am owed.”

Bragi looked as if he were about to argue, but when Loki turned to leave, he quickly agreed to his terms. He rushed into the garden, taking handfulls of the golden apples and placing them into a basket. When he was done, he handed the basket over to Loki’s waiting hand. Smirking, Loki placed the acorn into Bragi’s palm. As Bragi looked down in confusion, Loki turned to make his exit.

“What is this supposed to be, Skywalker?”

“Your beloved, lord Bragi,” Loki called over his shoulder. “She is just condensed into a much lighter form.”

“Are you trying to cheat me, you son of a whore!” Bragi shouted, and soon after he was marching after Loki. “When King Odin learns of your attempted treachery--”

“He will do nothing!” Loki snaps. “Just as he did nothing when your beloved was captured. Just as he did nothing when Hoenir sold her in exchange for his own life. And just as he does nothing when the matter does not concern him. I have returned your wife to you, lord Bragi. If you do not love her in this form, then that is your concern. If it displeases you so much, though, then I will remedy it for you.”

Loki snapped his fingers and the spell holding Idunn in the form of the acorn was broken. She transformed back into herself, unfortunately, in Bragi’s hands. Loki only heard as the two crashed to the ground and groaned in pain. Now that he had the apples, he didn’t want to linger there any
longer, lest Idunn get a look at his face. Clutching the basket tightly to his chest, Loki teleported away, back to where he and Hermes had entered into Asgard.

He was relieved to find that Hermes was already there waiting for him, sitting beneath the shade of a large tree. His friend shot him an angry glare when he saw what it was that Loki was carrying in his hands.

“That was cheating.”

“Oh? And how so?”

“I had that that giant right where I wanted him and you came along and stole my prize,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest in a huff.

“Yes, right where you wanted him. Listening to you rant on about your deeds past,” Loki laughed.

“I was regaling him with the tale of how I slew the hundred-eyed giant Argus! It was a tactic to instill fear into his heart and release the lady Idunn without any bloodshed.”

“Yes, and while you were doing that, I decided to take action,” Loki smirked. “You Olympians are creatures of skilled words, which I can respect, but at times action is needed instead.”

“I am a god of orators,” he shrugged. “Words are one of my weapons.”

“Yes, and with the many that you have it is a wonder that you did not slay your giant Argus by putting him to sleep with your words. What has become of Þjazi?”

Hermes looked away for a moment, and Loki swore that he saw a blush form on his olive colored skin. “…When you stole the lady away I tried to calm him and… he is asleep for now. Should we dispose of him?”

Loki laughed hard as he shook his head. “Idunn is safe for now and the Einherjar have most likely sent word to Odin in Midgard about her abduction. Let him deal with the matter and let us be away. Come, my friend, do not look so down. I would not have been able to rescue her without your distraction. For your reward help yourself to a few of Idunn’s apples.”

“Keep your ill-gotten prize,” Hermes scoffed. “The reward was not the apples so much as the challenge of obtaining them through my own tricks. To have them handed to me would be almost insulting.”

“Then by all means, keep the faith, my friend. I have no doubt that you will prevail in your efforts. After all, a man who began life stealing a herd of cattle is no doubt the most crafty bastard in all of the nine.”

“Damn straight I am,” Hermes laughed.

He walked up to Loki, put an arm around his shoulder and kissed his cheek. Loki nudged him playfully and the two stepped back inside of the fairy-ring. A few moments, and a horrid headache, later they were back inside of the Cave. Hermes thought that to be the end of their little adventure, but it seemed that Loki had other ideas. He watched as the little trickster set the basket of apples down next to the pillar and cast the runes again. Loki whispered words he could not hear, and suddenly the seventh circular boulder began to roll away.

“Another trip so soon?” Hermes asked.
“I promised you a trip through all of time and the realms, did I not? It seems only fair that we visit each one.”

“Will the apples keep in this room?”

“Oh, Hermes,” Loki grinned, “we won’t even be gone a moment.”

Hermes couldn’t resist his lovely Loki when the boy grabbed him by the arm and pulled him into the waiting darkness.

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They landed in the caverns of Nidavellir at the precise moment that two craftsmen brothers, Sindri and Brokkr, were fashioning gifts for the House of Bor, the current king of Asgard. The impressive spear, Gungnir had already been forged and was lying amongst the dwarves’ meager possessions. Hermes and Loki watched one of the brothers put a pig’s skin into a forge and commanded the other to never stop working the bellows until he returned to remove what was placed into the forge.

Loki knew what was in the forge, though. The golden prince had told him the story many times of how his beloved Mjolnir was forged in the darkness of Nidavellir from the heart of a dying star. The boys decided to have some fun then and took the form of two flies. Hermes flew around the face of Sindri as Loki bit the arms of Brokkr. When their efforts didn’t pay off, Loki bit the eyelid of Brokkr, causing the dwarf to curse and stop pumping the bellows. When seeing what his brother had done, Sindri shouted, pushed Brokkr away, and pulled the item from the forge. The hammer was fine in all senses, except for the shortened handle.

“You fool!” Sindri screamed at his brother. “The thrice damned Aesir will never accept this bastard of a weapon!”

“It was not my fault! That damned fly bit into my eye. Besides, it is just the handle. The hammer will still hit its mark true.”

“Do you think that they will care? They’ve been looking for any reason to skirt their payments and anything less than perfection will give them their excuse!”

Loki and Hermes watched from a distance as the brothers dissolved into a shouting match before they began to throw punches. The tricksters laughed as the two began rolling on the ground, each trying to beat the other to a bloody pulp. Nidavellir may have not been the most exciting choice, but it was entertaining by far. On the table containing the gifts for the house of Bor there lay the most stunning bronze helm Loki had ever seen. He claimed it as his prize before he and Hermes departed once more for the Cave of Time to seek out whatever adventure they could find in the nine.

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The two spent considerable time in the realm of the dark elves, Svartalfheim. The dark elves’ aversion to the harsh rays of the sun made for an accommodating climate for Loki and his sensitive nature. It was there that Loki and Hermes met a young mage known then simply as Malekith. In his studies of the realms, Loki had come across the mage’s name several times and knew of the dark future that he possessed. He would rise to leadership of his people and someday lead Svartalfheim into a civil war, one which threatened to tear the fragile realm apart and bring ruin to all of Yggdrasil. Loki also knew that Malekith would one day be overthrown by the true ruler, Queen Alflyse, after she created an alliance with the Aesir.

So what did Loki do with all of his knowledge of Malekith the Accursed? He used it for his own
benefit of course.

He and Hermes came to Malekith under the guise of soothsayers--Logi and Erinnes--willing to share all of their knowledge with the dark elf in exchange for his knowledge in seidr. Malekith was a man of great intellect, but he was also greedy. Loki and Hermes stayed in Svartalfheim for three seasons as the elf’s pupils. Though Hermes did not need the teachings of Malekith, Loki found himself thriving under his new tutor. Loki was formidable through Freyja’s and his own self-teaching, but under Malekith Loki truly felt his power grow in ways he’d never imagined. No longer did he tire himself through his illusions, teleportations, or transfigurations. He learned to defend himself in ways that Freyja never showed him--how could she, when she would have no guarantee that Loki would not use such violent means against his betrothed--by utilizing his own physical strength and natural agility. He learned how to push his stamina and reflexes to the point in which he could almost be considered as formidable as an Aesir. Malekith also showed him how to protect himself another’s seidr and how to turn the energy against his attacker. Most importantly, though, he taught Loki how to perfect his shape-shifting. Thor had long mastered how to transform himself into animals, and he could make minor adjustments to his physical appearance. Malekith showed him how to become another person. Though he was still locked in his Aesir form--no doubt a curse of Odin--he was able to change his appearance into any form he’d like.

When Loki’s skill had grown so powerful, Malekith demanded his payment in return: knowledge of what the future held for him in Svartalfheim. With a smile, Loki told the elf to slice Alflyse’s throat and take the throne the first chance he could. Malekith cursed them and demanded more for all that he had gifted, but “Logi” and “Erinnes” fled Svartalfheim, never to be seen again or have their names whispered anywhere in the nine realms. Two weeks later, following a failed assignation attempt of Queen Alflyse, the great war of Svartalfheim began, leading to some of the darkest years in Yggdrasil.

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Their time in Vanaheim was much briefer and much less interesting. They had arrived at the end of the Aesir-Vanir War and stood amongst the crowd of worn, defeated Vanir in their ravaged lands as the two sides came to a truce. Loki watched as a young, smug Odin--so much like Thor!--signed the treaty that would ensure a form of peace between the two realms, or more like, ensuring that the Aesir would cease their endless attacks upon the realm of seidmann and seidkonurs. Thus, Loki witnessed the beginnings of the millennia long bias against those who wield seidr. After all, they must be ergi cowards that they should fall and give in to all demands of the Aesir warlords. Were they real warriors, they would have continued to battle until this entire branch of Yggdrasil burned to cinder.

Instead, Loki had to watch as the elderly leader of the Vanir--his name long since forgotten to history, for the losers of battles are never remembered--was forced to concede to the Aesir demands. First, the Vanir would be demoted to minor deities, their hold over Midgard significantly decreased. Next, Hoenir would serve as regent for the Vanir, until a time in which they would be considered brought to heel and no longer a threat. Next, the hostages Njord and his children Freyr and Freyja--so beautiful even in her youth, Loki noted--would be brought to Asgard in assurance for peace. But let it not be said that the Aesir are greedy! For the last demand would guarantee a lasting peace between the two realms through an official union. Odin would take the greatest spoil of Vanahem for himself. The beautiful witch burnt three times and thrice reborn, Gullveig.

Indeed she was a beauty to behold as she struggled to free herself from the grasps of Odin’s brothers, Vili and Ve. Golden hair that fell in loose curls down her back, plush lips that were twisted downwards into an angry frown, and bright blue eyes that shot a deathly glare at the
smiling young king of Asgard. Loki couldn’t help but wonder when she had changed her name to Frigga.

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They were probably on Muspelheim for all of five minutes before Loki nearly collapsed from heat exhaustion and they were almost crushed by the giant Surtr. Hermes decided he could live without seeing this particular realm, and Loki heartily agreed.

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In Helheim Loki and Hermes made the acquaintance of the child queen of the realm of the dead. She was the child of a great Jotun witch, born half dead and was cast into the depths of this realm, out of fear for whatever power she may possess, by Odin. She was a sweet girl, though, eager to entertain the new guests of her realm, for she so rarely had the opportunity to host any pleasant company. Her world was full of those who were lost, angry, and searching for an escape into the promise of Odin’s Valhalla.

Little Hel took Loki and Hermes both by the hand as she led them through her kingdom, and Loki had to admit that, for a child, the girl showed a penchant for leadership that even Odin seemed to lack. Her lands contained a mixture of peoples, both good and bad but all considered unworthy by Odin. She gave lodgings to those sent to her by illness and ensured that those who had passed of old age were well taken care of. For those who fell in battle, or by some other cause, and were not chosen by Odin, she tried to make as comfortable as possible, granting them whatever she could give in order to ease their eternity. It wasn’t enough for them, though. They constantly moaned their agony and searched for ways to escape the child’s little kingdom.

Still, the half-dead girl smiled and offered her guests what little comforts she could. Though Loki gained no fortune or adventure from this visit, he did feel something akin to affection and respect for the child queen of the dead, and Hermes walked away with a new appreciation for his uncle’s role in Olympus. Perhaps he would assist his uncle soon.

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They stayed in Alfheim much longer than Loki had intended to, but not through his own choice. When he caught a single glance of the light elves of the realm, Hermes deemed this realm a paradise and decided that he would have to be dragged from there by his hair, kicking and screaming. His infatuation only grew worse as the elves taught Hermes their music and art. The things Loki did for his friend.

During their year long stay in Alfheim, Loki disguised himself as a female Aesir who had come to the lands in search of knowledge of seidr. It wouldn’t hurt to continue his studies while he was there, and he was still curious as to the mystery of the cave’s origin and its connection to Alfheim. Unfortunately, his disguise managed to capture the unwanted attention of the ruler of the realm, Freyr.

The king of Alfheim was as beautiful as his sister, but Loki’s knowledge of the king’s deeds filled his heart with a deep-seated hatred, and he saw the king as the most hideous creature of Yggdrasil. However, it appeared that they arrived in Alfheim at a time before Freyr met and abducted his queen.

Freyr, for his part, was completely enamored with Loki’s female form. In a realm full of light and brightness, this newcomer, “Lokasenna,” was exotic in her darkness. The raven colored hair that looked as if spun by silk, eyes as green as the rolling plains of his beloved homeland Vanaheim, and pale flesh that looked to have never been marred by the sun sent Freyr into a fit of lust and he knew that he must have her.
When Lokasenna and her odd friend, Dolios, appeared in the court’s festivities Freyr sought her out. He recited to her the most beautiful poems of love that his sklads could create. When she brushed off this initial advance, he bestowed upon her precious jewels and linens, which she accepted with disinterest, giving Freyr nothing in return, not even a smile. He was not deterred, though. He sought the fair maid out as she attempted to study with the wisest of Alfheim’s seidkonurs and praised her already immense gifts of magic. Freyr sent musicians to her nightly and praised her beauty. He gifted her with countless tomes from his private collections, some of which had been granted from Kvasir himself. Freyr found every moment he could to speak to the beautiful maid, basking in her presence even as she returned his advances with nothing but disinterest and—though he did not notice it—mild disgust. If anything, her dismissals made him try all the harder to win her affections.

The breaking point for Loki finally came when he was dragged by Hermes to the king’s latest grand feast. Hermes, or Dolios, had grown too accustomed in this land. He had made friends and connections with many of the court’s higher families, and there was even talk of having him betrothed to the lovely Groa, daughter of Freyr’s closest councilman. The light elves in turn adored the wily rogue who had so suddenly appeared in their realm and brought laughter and delight to all those he encountered. Loki almost feared that Hermes’ initial threat of remaining there forever would be enforced, but after the feast, he could take no more.

Freyr had managed to corner Lokasenna as she spoke with the acquaintances of her friend Dolios. He smiled brightly as he managed to pull her away to the center of the grand court room, at which point all music ceased and every eye in the room turned towards them. Lokasenna groaned when Freyr took her hand in his and got down on one knee. He spoke loudly for twenty minutes of Lokasenna’s beauty, grace, and untamed nature. He recited poems, likening her to all of the shining gold of the realm and calling her Asgard’s greatest jewel. Finally, with unshed tears in his eyes, Freyr asked for Lokasenna to do him the greatest honor of becoming his queen.

When the fool was finally done, Loki pulled his hand out of Freyr’s grasp and finally let his hate for the king spew forth. He called him everything from a coward to a monster, screaming claims that he had would have to give away all of his gold and great sword in order to find anyone who would lay with him. Loki didn’t care that others were staring or that Freyr had no idea what he was talking about. He raged until his face was red and all of the air had left his lungs. When he was done, he found Hermes in the crowd, grabbed him by the hair, and dragged him kicking and screaming back to the Cave of Time.

When Freyr overcame the shock of Lokasenna’s refusal, he attempted to seek her out, but she had fled the realm. No one on Asgard had ever heard of a woman by her name, nor on any other realm. It seemed as though she had simply vanished from Yggdrasil without ever leaving any evidence she had been there at all, save for Freyr’s broken heart. After two years of searching, Odin finally granted Freyr permission to sit on Hlidskjalf. Looking out over all of the universe, he searched for his lost Lokasenna, but could not see her. What he found instead was the stunning Jotun Gerd, whose beauty eclipsed every memory of Lokasenna and Freyr knew that he must have him. And this time, he wouldn’t take no as an answer.

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Throughout their travels, Loki and Hermes found that while each realm they visited held its own merits, for the most part they remained trapped in a constant stasis. Only Midgard, with its inhabitants containing such a short lifespan, was susceptible to change over time. For this reason, Loki and Hermes found themselves traveling to this realm quite often. The mortals of this realm were primitive, yet quite fascinating creatures. Loki and Hermes watched as the people first conquered the workings of fire, created their first written languages, and developed their various
tools to enrich their lives. It was quite astounding, really, to witness as the creatures, thought so lowly of in all of Yggdrasil, pulled themselves up from the dirt of the earth to build for themselves empires that reached far out into the heavens.

The two young men visited Midgard sporadically in order to witness the changing developments of the mortals' lives, though Loki was careful to avoid Odin’s chosen people in the cold lands of mountain and sea, always fearful that the Allfather would stumble upon them in his own adventures. The thing that amazed Loki the most, however, were the various kinds of tribes that Midgard had to offer. There were millions--perhaps billions--of them, scattered far and wide in this strange realm, each containing its own unique culture and customs. There were cultures of artists, farmers, poets, navigators, nobilities, inventors, mystics, slaves and so much more. There was just so much possibility on Midgard, and Loki wanted to experience it all.

Odin will no doubt be in a rage, Loki thought, when he casts his eye on what the followers of the Olympians will one day create. In their various travels throughout the different centuries of Midgard, Loki and Hermes--smug bastard--witnessed how the small portion of the world, granted to them through the treaty with the Aesir, grew and expanded, its people creating fantastic works of art and literature, until they became the pinnacle of the realm’s ancient world. Centuries later, the two would see how the Olympians were the most revered over Midgard’s greatest empire, Rome.

“I still don’t understand where they came up with a name as awful as Mercury,” Hermes lamented as he reached for another date.

The two young men were currently seated in a private box of the capital’s grand coliseum, watching as two men in helms wielding spears and shields attempted to slaughter each other for the crowd’s amusement. Oh how the people of Asgard would love Rome, Loki thought.

“This coming from the man whose aliases include ‘Pheletes,’ ‘Eriouenes,’ and ‘Promachus.’ At least this one is easy enough to pronounce. And you should be proud. While Odin’s chosen have become fishers and pillagers your father’s have gone on to create an empire that dominates the world.”

“Aye, lovely Loki. But what good is it if these creatures can’t even get my name properly. Apollo got to keep his…”

“Does nothing please you?”

Instead of answering right away, Hermes leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Loki’s cheek. “The smile on your face whenever I do that does.”

Loki shot Hermes a glare and did not speak for the rest of the gladiatorial games, suddenly very interested in watching as the loser of the battle was eviscerated with a spear to the sound of applause.

Loki had read stories of the people of Jotunheim having visited and traveled the realm of Midgard in the time before the great war, but to see the evidence of it came as a great shock. When he and Hermes discovered the little known people in the cluster of island in the eastern part of the realm, they also found the great, monolithic moai statues and the smaller tiki. From what Loki could gather from the people’s stories, these great figures were their ancestors, traced all the way back to their creators. The creators were large, fearsome creatures who possessed the spiritual power to
effect the world around them. Mana was their word for it, but Loki recognized it as a form of seidr. Each island had different stories about these great creators, calling them fantastical gods who contained great power and had reverence to the lands they walked.

The peoples of these islands each contained their subtle differences in their worship of ancestors and creators, but they all showed reverence to the images and attempted to gain their mana. The greatest way they attempted this was by marking their bodies through what Loki learned was a “tatau.” The people would use a finely pointed chisel to imbed dark pigments into their skin and create fantastic, ornate designs; the kind that Loki had only seen in the illustrations of the people of Jotunheim. Loki wanted to be marked like the men of these cultures, for if he could not walk in his true form, at least let him wear some sort of imitation so all may know of his proud heritage. He pleaded with the people to allow him to receive the tatau, but each one told him no. Even though he possessed great power, he was an outsider to these people, one who had not proved himself and would offend the gods if he were to receive the gift of the tatau. He wasn’t worthy in Asgard and he wasn’t worthy here. Loki began to wonder if he’d ever find a place where he belonged.

Loki and Hermes learned the hard way that mortals would eventually either cease to believe in their pantheons and power, and declare them either non-existent or demons. They came to this conclusion when they arrived at a time on Midgard when the mortals were suffering from some great pestilence. They watched in horror as bodies--emaciated, black boil-covered, and black-fingered--were stacked one by one onto a cart, pulled by a robed man collecting them.

It seemed that all throughout the realm, the people were succumbing to this terrible illness. Each village they visited contained mass graves full of the lucky dead, while hundreds of others were left to suffer. The lucky ones had brave caretakers to help ease their suffering. Most, though were either abandoned by those afraid of the illness, or carted away to live in quarantine until the inevitable happened. For those were had yet to be touched by the sickness, they turned to the divine for answers and protection.

In great brick structures called churches, the mortals huddled together, lit candles and chanted pleas of mercy and salvation. Though Loki felt bad for their predicament, it was Hermes who decided they should take mercy upon them and try find a way to help. Loki, begrudgingly, agreed. So when they found a weeping mother, clutching her young son, so covered in so many black puss-seeping boils, Loki gently took the boy from her and chanted the sacred spells of healing. All who witnessed were too stunned to say a word when the boils receded from the boy’s body and his strength returned. The mother broke into tears, knelt at Loki’s feet and called him a saint. The crowd, however, had a different opinion.

Many events occurred between the healing and Loki’s being tied to a stake with the intention of being burnt alive. There had been accusations from a mob about witchcraft--which Loki outright refused to deny, for he was proud of his skill, damn it--and attempts to cleanse him with water they considered holy. When Loki laughed at their attempts, they declared him an evil spirit. Hermes tried to help by telling them that he was a member of the house of Odin, but in this part of Midgard the Aesir and their kin had long been dubbed demons. Loki was declared to be a minion of someone they called Satan, sent to tempt the mortals and lead them away from their God.

Loki indulged the mob for a while, he even allowed them to light the kindling at his feet. All the while, though, he laughed and swore that he would never try to give assistance to this ignorant race ever again. When the heat of the fire started to get to him, though, Loki transformed into his magpie form and flew from his execution. It no doubt gave the mortals something else to be afraid of, but Loki did find their horrified expressions to be quite hilarious. Served them right.
Not all of their exploration consisted of examining distant cultures and empires, though. Once in a while, Loki and Hermes took in a show. Standing tightly together in the crowded, standing room only theater, the two young men watched as a young boy playing a mischievous sprite named Puck as he made a mess of the lives of four lovers. Loki was enraptured by the play, not simply for the performance, but for the brilliant use of words to create such powerful meaning. He doubted that even lord Bragi’s skill could match with the playwright’s talent.

From then on, the two made it a point to return to the theater to witness the playwright’s work. And if a few of the author’s scripts went missing after the shows well… Who would notice?

There were times when Loki thought about seeking out his Captain Rogers, curious to see how the man fared in his battle, but it seemed that the cave had other plans. They would always arrive at times that were either centuries before the Captain’s time or decades past when he was surely long dead. It appeared that the Captain and his allies were successful in their fight and they had won their war, but, as it was in this realm, another one was never too far away… These people truly are children of the Aesir, they way they constantly seek out wars, conquests, and subjugation of others. Still, Loki had to give them credit for their creativity and ability to adapt to the constant change of the world around them.

On one occasion, the cave brought them to an era when Midgard was full of bright lights, loud noises, and speed. Their last visit to the realm had been at a time when the mortals were celebrating high culture and scientific discoveries. The Renaissance, the mortals had called it. Loki and Hermes had spent considerable time with a particularly interesting mortal in the Tuscany village of Vinci, giving him notes on his planned inventions and encouraging his scientific endeavors into anatomical studies. During that mortal’s time, though the creatures of the realm were on the brink of so many fantastic discoveries, time moved at a much more leisurely pace. Now, though, the people were rushing about like ants marching in their rows, running so quickly. For what, Loki did not know, but he saw how the realm just seemed to be in such a damned hurry. It was almost dizzying to behold.

The year they arrived, Loki later learned, was 1991. They had arrived in a great, man-made forested area that was surrounded by a large city, whose bright lights and high towers rivaled even the capital of Asgard. The city, New York, was a crowded, gray, and dirty area, stuffed full of people in strange garb and even stranger adornments. Loki and Hermes did their best to blend in with the crowds, changing out their travel garb for the loose fitting flannel overshirts, odd rough feeling blue trousers, and footwear that the majority of the people seemed to favor. They also seemed to favor looking as if they hadn’t bathed, Loki noted, but he said nothing and adapted to the style.

Once again, it was Hermes who took naturally to the people of this particular era. They were in the city for no more than two hours before the messenger made the acquaintance of a group of young mortals. They engaged him in odd conversations about music by performers with the oddest names he’s ever heard, some strange form of entertainment called “movie,” and topics about the political state of the realms. Hermes, gifted as he was with words and lies, kept up with the mortal’s chatter and even managed to sway a few opinions on some sort of upcoming election--these mortals got to choose their leaders! The next thing Loki knew, he and Hermes were being dragged along by the group to a place they called “Nightclub.”

“Nightclub,” Loki discovered, was similar to the great halls he knew in Asgard, though it was
much darker and louder. The people packed themselves in tightly to the dark, crowded building with the intention to dance together to strange music played at vulgar levels, and drink their new alcohol until they were falling on their faces. Typically Loki liked to keep a clear mind in any given situation, but it was different here, where no one knew him, where no one was watching him and judging his every movement. So when one of the girls in Hermes’ new group of friends took him by the wrist and led him to the dance floor, Loki allowed it. He smiled flirtatiously and placed his hands on the girl’s hips as she pressed her body against him in a too familiar manner and moved to the rhythm of the pounding music. He could not help but laugh at the mortal’s form of dancing. It seems that the goal was no longer to create the illusion of two partners gliding gracefully along the floor, but rather to create the illusion of sex. There was a charm to it, Loki had to admit.

He danced with the girl through several songs, accepting drinks called beers from Hermes when his friend would come by with a man or woman of his own. The girl, Amie, smiled seductively at Loki as she ran her fingers along his chest, her eyebrow raising suggestively, as if she were promising much more. Loki considered fucking her. Not particularly because he was attracted to the girl, but just to see what it would be like. She was clearly more than willing and there was no one around to stop him from it. He still was not sure whether Heimdall’s gaze could penetrate through time, but surely all he needed to do was to test to find out.

So Loki returned her smile and ran his hand down to the middle of her back, pulling her in close. She liked that. Her brightly painted lips widened into a large grin as she tilted her head to the side and leaned up towards him. Loki leaned closer, but just as he brushed her lips, he felt a tap at his shoulder. Startled, and slightly annoyed, Loki turned to see who was trying to get his attention.

Behind him stood a relatively attractive young man with thick brown hair, round dark eyes, and a smile a grin that would charm the pants off of anyone… At least, it seemed to be having that effect on Amie. When she caught a glimpse of the other man, she let go of Loki and stepped away. She stared at him with wide, excited eyes and with her mouth open as if she were trying to speak but couldn’t form the words.

Irritated at the girl’s wavering affections, Loki snapped at the other man. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah, hi,” the man smiled. “Mind if I cut in?”

“N-no!” Amie managed to stutter out.

Loki rolled his eyes and turned away, intent on finding Hermes and drinking more of the mortals’ alcohol, but the tug of a hand on his shirt pulled him back. He looked down and saw that the man’s hands had fisted in his overshirt and he was holding him in place.

“Thanks,” he said to Amie. Loki didn’t know who was more shocked, him or the girl, as the man pulled him along and began to dance with him.

For a moment he just stood there, frozen with the shock as the man gave him his charming smile and moved against his body the way Amie had done previously. Then, after a while, Loki let out a loud laugh and began to move with the man, wrapping his arms around his shoulders as he pulled Loki close.

He grinned and leaned up so he could shout in Loki’s ear above the music, “Sorry if I freaked you out. Most guys don’t take well to being asked to dance by another guy.”

“You’re not the first man I’ve danced with, nor will you be the last,” he assured.
“I better be the last one of the night at least,” he laughed.

“That depends on if I like the way you move.”

“That sounds like a challenge.”

“It may be.”

“Sweetheart, I am not one to back down from a challenge.” As if to prove his point, he pulled Loki impossibly closer, his knee nudging between Loki’s legs so that he could grind his pelvis against him.

*Oh, I like this one.*

Loki lost track of the time he spent dancing with the other man. By the time they finally pulled away from each other to retrieve refreshments from the bar Loki’s hair was slicked back with sweat and his face was flushed red with the heat. The other man smiled and took Loki by the wrist to lead him to a couple of empty barstools.

“So,” the man began once they had fresh beers, “you got a name?”

“I have many.”

“Are you going to tell me one of them, or do I have to call you ‘gorgeous’ all night long? Not that I’m opposed to it, mind you.”

Loki considered giving him one of his aliases, but either the alcohol was beginning to go to his head or the man’s smile was just that charming, because he found himself answering, “Loki.”

“Huh… Don’t hear that one everyday. Interesting name.”

“May I have yours in return?”

“You mean you don’t know me?” He asked, his eyebrows furrowing in mild confusion.

“Should I?”

“Twenty year-old billionaire, graduated MIT at fifteen, gone through rehab twice by seventeen doesn’t ring a bell?”

“I hear no bells. Nor have I heard your name.”

“Wow… It’s been a while since I met someone who didn’t know me. I figured you did out there… Anyway, I’m Tony. Tony Stark.”

*Stark…* Loki knew that name. Was it common?

“Stark… You wouldn’t happen to be a relative of a Howard Stark, would you?”

At that, the smile from Tony’s face fell. “Yeah… my dad. Good ol’ pop,” he sighed and took a swig of his beer.

“You’re nothing like him.”

“What do you mean?” He asked, his features showing his growing anger.
“Well, you’re actually pleasant to be around,” Loki shrugged. “I’m sorry if it causes offence, but your father was an ass, disrespectful, and had an ego large enough to eclipse your sun.”

“Trust me, no offence taken,” he laughed. “Although I’m not used to anybody but me pointing out Howard’s flaws. You sound like you’ve got some personal experience.”

When Loki didn’t laugh like he’d hoped, or answer right away, Tony’s smile fell and was replaced by a look of concern. “You don’t actually have any experience, do you? I know he got around, especially after Mom died, but he didn’t like… fuck your mom or… you or anything, did he?”

“Relax Starkson, any fornication with my dam by your father would have been highly unlikely. As for myself, he should only be so lucky.”

“Good. And it’s just Stark, or Tony… or ‘Oh God, please more’ depending on how the night goes,” he winked.

“You sound exceedingly confident.”

“Why shouldn’t I be?” He shrugged. “I’m young, witty, and a complete babe. Not to mention I’ve got the attention of the most attractive person at the bar. I’d say that the odds are in my favor so far.”

“And if I were to turn my back now and walk away?”

“I’d curse, take the hit to my ego and probably see if I could find anyone else willing to blow me in the bathroom. A conciliation prize, if you will.”

Loki had to laugh out loud at the man’s honesty. It was endearing, so much like Hermes, and Loki found it refreshing. Yes, he was cocky, and in the back of his mind it reminded Loki of a certain someone, but it was in a disarming way. Where Thor would expect anyone to fall at his feet with tales of his accomplishments--or from merely saying his title--Tony spoke with a sense of well-deserved confidence and a snarky attitude, as if it were all just a fun joke.

He talked of his own life and achievements, of how hard he worked to crawl out from under the weight of his father’s name and legacy in order to create his own, and about how still so much was expected of him. He was a prince, Loki realized. An unwilling prince with so much expected of him, but lacking the desire to fulfill the role others wanted him to play. Loki found that he could relate.

Through their conversations Tony made is intent very clear. He leaned in close to tell a joke, he casually touched Loki’s hand and arm, and turned his body towards him, legs spread leaving himself open. Of course, if Loki were a half-wit and couldn’t pick up on these signals, there was also Tony’s words of “I want you to sit on my face.” He had said it in a harmless fashion, of course, and didn’t attempt to crowd Loki’s personal space, which he was extremely grateful for. If it had been Thor who said such a thing to him, Loki would have found himself on the receiving end of an unpleasant molestation. Tony, though he did wish for that particular outcome, said it more to test the waters and gauge Loki’s interest.

“So, you haven’t told me anything about yourself,” Tony said.

“Because I’m more interested in you.”

“Please,” he scoffed, “if you want to know about me, just pick up a tabloid. It’s front-page news whenever I take a shit these days. I already know I’m awesome. Tell me about you. Where are you from?”
“Somewhere far from here.”

“Well, that’s helpful. Any family?”

“None that I would consider as such. And no, I will not clarify that.”

“Alright… favorite color then?”

“Green.”

“A specific answer! Good, we’re making progress. Ok… AC/DC or Black Sabbath?”

“…What are those?”

“You are beautiful, but hopeless,” he sighed. “So, not from here, no family, no clue about musical greatness, and you like the color green. You’re an alien, aren’t you?”

“Oh yes,” Loki smiled. “My friend and I arrived on this realm just this afternoon through a magical portal. I come from a land of snow and giants who once tried to conquer your primitive people.”

“If they all looked like you, then I would have gladly knelt down before our new overlords.”

“I wouldn’t be opposed to some kneeling now,” Loki said with a suggestive smile. “Go on. Worship me, mortal.”

Tony grinned widely while his fingers inched forward to touch Loki’s hand. “Can I kiss you?”

Now that was a first. Loki’s experience with kissing was extremely limited, having only done so with Thor, Hermes, and, once, Freyja. With Thor, it was always a forced affair that would leave him panting for breath while his lips swelled and bruised. His kiss with Hermes was nice, but it was something done in the heat of the moment, all force and heat and passion. He’d never had anyone actually ask to kiss him before. So, not knowing what else to do, Loki nodded in permission.

Tony smiled and leaned in close. Loki could feel his warm breath against his skin a moment before soft lips touched his own. It was odd at first. Tony’s movements were slow and gentle, trying to coax Loki to respond without forcing a reaction. Loki tried to mimic his movements, but the result was a little more than awkward. Tony just laughed softly and tilted his head for a better angle. As he continued his ministrations, Loki picked up on what he should do and parted his lips to the gentle prod of Tony’s tongue. It swept between his lips to touch Loki’s own as his warm hand moved to the back of his neck, drawing him closer. All too soon, though, Tony pulled back wearing a smug, satisfied grin. Loki smiled shyly back, his usual confidence abandoning him at the moment.

“Tony!”

And just like that, the moment was shattered as Tony jumped away from Loki at the sound of the angry voice. Behind Tony there was a tall, bald man with a full beard and cold, disapproving eyes. Tony looked nervous for a moment before he gave the man a cheeky grin.

“Hey, Obie. Whatcha doing here?”

“Looking for you,” the man said sternly. “Tony, you know you’re not supposed to be here. For fuck’s sake, kid, you’re supposed to be on the wagon. Not to mention you’re not even old enough to be drinking at all.”
“Come on, Obie,” he sighed. “I just needed to let off some steam. And, look, I made a new friend. Say hi to Loki!”

The man turned his gaze to Loki, but his eyes didn’t soften. “I think you’ve had enough, Tony. Come on, we need to go. You have three meetings tomorrow and I’ll be damned if you’re missing them.”

“Fucking hell, why can’t you handle it? The company isn’t even in my name yet.”

“Tony, you know that this is your responsibility. I can’t be there to hold your hand all the time. The company is going to be yours soon enough and you can’t just brush it off. What would your dad say?”

“Probably something full of shit, if he bothered to talk to me at all.”

“Tony…”

“Fine!” Tony threw up his hands in defeat. “Fucking fine.”

He threw back the brown bottle in his hand and finished the contents in two large gulps. When he was done, he threw the bottle at the man’s feet and turned back to Loki.

“Sorry, Sweet-cheeks. Gonna have to cut the night short.” He raked his eyes up and down Loki’s body and muttered a quiet ‘damn it.’

“Are you going to be locked back in your ivory tower?”

“That’s one way of putting it,” he laughed. “Are you going to be in town long?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

Tony nodded before grabbing a bar napkin and quickly writing something down. It was a series of numbers, clumped together to form some kind of pattern. “This is my number. Give me a call if you’re still around.”

“Perhaps I will.”

“Have a good one, beautiful.” He winked and leaned in to press a chaste kiss on Loki’s lips. Loki smiled in return and felt an odd sense of sadness at seeing the man leave.

The feeling left, though, when he saw that the other man was still standing before him. Before Loki could react, the man snatched the napkin out of his hand and tucked it into his jacket pocket.

“Listen, you little fruit. Tony Stark is set to becoming one of the youngest CEOs in history. His father’s company is worth billions and Tony is the only person with the skill and talent to lead it into the future. I will not have some skinny-assed faggot fuck this up for me! If I catch you near him again, I will kill you.”

Loki was too shocked by the threat to respond immediately, and the man left before he could. That reaction had been unexpected. Loki had been through enough of Midgard’s timelines to suspect that the reaction to same-sex relations was often mixed. Some, as in their time in Tuscany and Rome, seemed to have no problem with it. Others, like the people of Britannia during the author’s time, frowned greatly upon it. It would seem that this was one of the latter situations. Shame, too. Tony seemed nice. Oh well, Loki thought, he wasn’t likely to see him again anyway.
“Lovely Loki!” A voice shouted behind him.

Loki turned to see Hermes standing behind him with his hair tousled and a contented, freshly fucked smile on his face. It was nice to see that the night was turning out well for someone, at least. Loki nodded to his friend, who took that as an invitation to sit in the now vacant seat next to him.

“Where are your new friends?” Loki asked.

“The girls are resting now,” he laughed. “I must say, the stamina of the mortals has significantly decreased over time. It used to be that they could take the affections of a god and be on their feet again in a matter of moments. Now, they just collapse against the wall and gasp for air.”

“To be fair, from what you’ve told me, you Olympians frequent the mortals too often to sate your lusts. Perhaps they just grew used to your attentions. Now, though, you have to imagine that they don’t make love to a god everyday.”

“True,” he nodded. “So what happened to your handsome friend, the spawn of Hephaestus?”

“The spawn of who?”

“Hephaestus, my half-brother. The mortals in our jurisdiction admire his skill in craftsmanship so much that they’ve named him god of blacksmiths, metals, and artisans.”

“He did mention that he liked to invent and build things in his spare time. How could you possibly know that?”

“Are you kidding? He looks just like my niece Euthenia, a patron of prosperity. I am not the only Olympian to impregnate a mortal, so no doubt this realm is crawling with the spawn of our bastards. Your friend just happens to be one of them.”

“You Olympians are like a plague, just spreading out everywhere.”

“That we are. So, you seemed to be enjoying yourself.”

“Do I detect a hint of jealousy, my friend?”

“Only slightly. You are your own person, Loki, not my possession. Who you choose to acquaint yourself with is not my concern. Though, I am upset that you shared so many of your lovely smiles with him. I will always horde those greedily.”

“Fear not, Messenger, you shall always have a smile from me. Besides, I doubt if I’ll be able to see him again. His caretaker made that very clear.”

“You would let that idiot mortal’s words stop you?”

“No, but I feel it’s best not to get distracted by wanting something I wouldn’t be able to keep anyway. We traveled here for fun, and that is what we shall have.”

Despite the convictions behind Loki’s words, though, he spent the remainder of the night sitting on the barstool nursing his beer, occasionally thinking about how Tony’s kiss was the sweetest and kindest he’d ever received.

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Their stay in Midgard in the twentieth century did not last for too long. They were back inside of
the cave within the year and adding their new souvenirs—flannel shirts, something called videotapes, books of fiction, and large, graffiti chunks of what the mortals called die Mauer that they had been very opposed against—to their growing collection of items gathered from each realm they’d visited. As Hermes was separating their individual piles, Loki was already going back to the runes, trying to determine where they should go next. A thought occurred to Hermes then.

“You know, you promised me a trip through all nine realms. So far, we’ve only visited eight.”

“Yes, I know,” Loki nodded. “Each time we depart I do hope to be led into Jotunheim, but the runes of the cave seem to have other plans for us.”

“Plans?” He scoffed. “That’s ascribing a lot of power to a cavern inside of a mountain. Just command it to take us to Jotunheim. I must see the land that birthed my lovely Loki and feast in the realm of giants.”

“I don’t believe it is that simple,” Loki sighed. “The runes do not seem to take requests. Instead, they constantly ask what we are seeking. We’ve been seeking adventure, knowledge, danger, and fun, so it has taken us to the places it thought we needed to go. For some reason, Jotunheim doesn’t appear to be on list of ideal destinations for the cave.”

“Perhaps we are just asking for the wrong things, then?” Hermes suggested. “Cast them again. Let’s see if we can make this work for us.”

Loki nodded enthusiastically and quickly grabbed up the bag containing the runes. He’d been hoping since the beginning of their travels that they would somehow be led into Jotunheim. To see the land of his birth would be a dream come true for the young prince. After spending the entirety of his life surrounded by those who thought him to be an inferior savage, he longed to be among his own kind. Though he was already very skilled, he wished to study his seidr under the tutorship of the Jotun mages. He wanted to look upon his giant kin and see their impressive strength and the beauty of their cerulean skin and birth scars. He just wanted so badly to be in a world where he belonged.

Loki cast the runes and the question of what he sought was asked.

This time, Hermes answered it. “I seek truth. To know where Loki came from.”

The result was instantaneous. The fourth boulder began to roll away, revealing the dark entrance that lay hidden behind. Loki wasted no time before grabbing hold of Hermes’s wrist and running towards it, allowing the two men to be enveloped by the darkness. Loki was excited, for he had been waiting so long to see Jotunheim. If he knew what he was to find, though, perhaps he would have waited longer…

Since learning the truth of his origins, Loki had often dreamed of what Jotunheim would be like. To hear the Aesir talk, Jotunheim was a cold, harsh realm of eternal winter, plagued with biting wind, jagged mountains, and snow so cold that even the giants of Muspelheim would freeze in their tracks. It was a land where only the strong and savage would be able to survive. The few unbiased tomes from Alfheim had included illustrations of the great city of Utgard, depicting it as a small, grey kingdom built up from the rock of the land and surrounded on all sides by great spires of ice. Though the illustration tried to depict it fairly, it too considered the realm as a land uninhabitable. For what sort of civilized creature could possibly live in a world of cold and dark?

In Loki’s mind, though, Jotunheim was always a compliment to Asgard. Where the latter was too
bright and warm from the light of its twin suns and excessive metals, Jotunheim would be cool, dark, and comforting, lit only by the distant stars and the auroras in Yggdrasil. It would have great cities with buildings reaching out into the heavens, large enough to dwarf the work of the Aesir, and more beautiful than their war-mongering minds could ever comprehend. For why would they constantly attack and invade the realm if they were not envious of what they had created? Loki had pictured over and over again how beautiful it would be. He pictured looking upon his kin, seeing their cerulean with intricate birth scars and recognizing his true self within them. And though he was already greatly skilled, he longed to tutor under the great mages of Jotunheim and learn to wield his seidr the way it was intended. He pictured feasting in their great halls, walking along the infamous ice-bridges of Gastropnir, riding the great Urdrs through the plains of Thrymheim. Most of all, though, he just pictured a home. The cave, though, had other plans.

For what it’s worth, Loki was right about Jotunheim initially. As soon as he and Hermes landed on the outskirts of Utgard, all of the warmth that had overwhelmed Loki his whole life seeped from his body, and for once, he felt comfortable in his own skin. He and Hermes gasped as they looked out onto the city. As he thought, the buildings and palace reached up into the skies, their tops seeming to touch the stars. The snow covered landscape was covered in a comforting blue-green light that made the buildings and great spires of ice glitter like star-light. It was beautiful, just as Loki had always pictured… until he actually began to take in the scenery before him.

Many of what he thought were spires of ice sprouting out of the ground were actually remains from toppled buildings, jagged and broken. The shadows on the snow were the stains of spilt blood and all around bodies, both Jotun and Aesir, young and old, littered the ground. All around were tell-tale signs of battle and bloodshed, of a world brought to ruin.

“Loki,” Hermes whispered, placing a hand on his shoulder, “where are we?”

“This is Utgard… I think.”

“What happened here?”

“War,” Loki answered simply and he began to walk forward.

Hermes followed after Loki, all the while his eyes darting around, fearful of someone lurking in the shadows not having their fill of blood. Loki just kept his eyes forward, towards the citadel in the distance. At first he was curious as to why, of all times, the cave had brought them to the great war. Then he remembered Hermes’s question to the runes. He wanted to know where Loki had come from. By all the accounts Loki had ever heard, he had come from the end of the great war; a cast-out discovered by Odin and brought into the royal house of Asgard. This is where Odin had saved him from a lonely, cruel death at the hands of his own kind. So why had Loki been so desperate to come to Jotunheim all of this time? Why was he marching towards the very place where Odin claimed to have found him abandoned now? Well, it is because of one simple thing, one small question that had been nagging in the back of Loki’s mind since the revelation of his heritage. It was the thing that kept him from blindly accepting what the Aesir told him he should be grateful for. The thing that kept him so stubbornly resistant to all attempts made to assimilate him into their culture…

If Loki was just an abandoned runt, found simply by chance… how did Odin know that he was Laufey’s son?

Loki would find his answer soon enough. For as they walked on, the sounds of cries, screams and curses in the distance became louder. The closer they got to the citadel, the more they saw that whatever battle had ravaged was not yet done. Masses of bodies were clumped together in combat. The Aesir were as numerous as a colony of ants as they surrounded the massive giants on all sides.
The great warriors were doing their best to stave off the attacks and keep the Aesir from getting closer to the main fortress, but it was a losing battle. The Aesir were too great in their numbers, and despite the seidr Loki could see several wielding, they were no match to the smaller, swifter creatures lost in their berserker rage.

From behind him, Loki could hear Hermes telling Loki to stop, that they should turn back before they walk into the battle, but he ignored his friend. The messenger cursed his friend as he marched on, straight into the line of combat, as if on some sort of mission and the great battle around him were nothing more than a minor distraction. It was nothing to Loki to throw up a defensive spell if one of the Aesir or Jotun came to close. Hermes chose the safer option of taking to the sky, keeping his eye on his friend as he walked on. Before long, Loki was through the worst of the battle and was coming up upon the entrance of the citadel. Outside of the fortress façade, there stood a ring of Einherjar, weapons raised at the Jotun who were screaming at their attackers to stand down and let them pass. Loki wondered why they did not simply attack and force their way through, but then he saw what was really keeping them back.

At the center of the formation, a single member of the Einherjar was holding his sword at the throat of a small Jotun.

The Jotun was down on his knees, trembling in fear as he clutched something in his arms. He was small for his kind, even smaller than Loki, with smooth black hair shrouding his face, parted only by the two small horns protruding from his skull. It was a child, Loki realized. A child younger than himself, and in his arms was another Jotun, what would most likely be considered a toddler. The youngest had his arms clutched tightly around the older as both of them shook with fear. The crowd of Jotunar looked on with fearful and angry expressions as the Einherjar kept the boys in place, his sword cutting into the boy’s neck if anyone even dared to take a step closer.

Behind the ring of Einherjar, though, came a very loud, pained scream. Whatever reason they were holding to two children for was to keep all eyes away from what it was they were hiding behind, and Loki so desperately wanted--needed--to know what it was. So Loki used his seidr to hide himself from the soldier’s eyes as he slipped past the formation. And there, behind the guards, is where Loki discovered the truth.

Through the open doors of the citadel, Loki could see inside to the grand throne room of the Jotun king. Sitting on the great throne of spiked ice and frost was not the realm’s king, though, but Odin. The king of Asgard looked weary, his hair matted in dried blood and sticking to his skin. His brows were furrowed in deep concentration while the socket that once contained his right eye was seeping with blood. He rested his chin on his fist as he looked down on the floor before him. And it was there that Loki first looked upon his mother.

The king of Jotunheim was currently on his back, arms held down by two members of Odin’s guards as his legs were spread open before Odin. Loki moved closer to the king. His mother’s frame was slender than he thought it would be. The muscles were lean and toned, a great contrast to the massive bulk he had always pictured. He also lacked the dark hair that Loki possessed, but Loki could attribute that to his role as a warrior. The lack of hair allowed him to see the unique set of horns his mother possessed. There were three, each framing his skull like some form of helm. Laufey also possessed Loki’s sharp cheekbones and strong jaw-line, each marked with dark birth scars… Loki may have just been imagining it, but he believed that he looked like his mother.

Laufey’s scream of pain brought him back to the scene at hand, though, and Loki took in what exactly was going on. Laufey’s body was indeed slender, save for the rounded stomach that clearly showed him to be with child. Dark blue blood was staining the floor around Laufey’s waist, and it was then that Loki realized that his screams were that of child-birth. Loki was about to witness his
own birth.

There was more screaming to the side of the throne room. Loki looked over and saw the largest Jotun he had ever seen lying on his stomach, his body being held down by massive ropes as he was forced to look on. He snarled like a wild beast and screamed, demanded Odin to release him and allow him to comfort his mate. Farbauti’s cries went unheard, and Loki’s father raged all the more. He cursed, made threats, and swore to single-handedly rip Odin’s head from his neck. Still, Odin gave no response.

Laufey screamed again and slammed his foot so hard down onto the ground that a great crack appeared in the floor, spreading all the way up the room’s wall. Still unseen under the guise of his spell, Loki walked around Laufey’s body until he stood between his legs. From this position, Loki could see the small head of black hair pushing slowly out of Laufey’s opening. Without anyone to assist, the process was slow and painful as the babe was slowly being forced, unsuspecting of the horrors around him, into the harsh world. Loki stood there the entire time, letting himself absorb the cries of pain and anguish from his mother and father, as slowly, as the tiny babe was pushed from the comfort of his mother’s womb.

He watched, fascinated, as more of the babe appeared. The head was through, followed by a tiny blue arm. Next came the baby’s chest, until, finally, Laufey gave one last blood-curdling scream and the child was completely out, falling onto the cold stone floor. The babe’s mouth opened and he screamed his discomfort to all who could hear. Before anyone else could get to him, Loki walked towards the baby. He was so tiny, especially in comparison to the great size of his mother. Loki traced his blue skin with his fingertip, following the raised outlines of his birth scars. The baby’s color was so beautiful and as Loki examined him, a tear came to his eye.

Then the oddest thing happened. The baby ceased his crying and opened his eyes, revealing the deep ruby red irises. He looked towards where Loki was kneeling, and, though Loki was sure that there was no way the babe could possibly see him, he smiled.

The moment was over all too soon, though, as he heard the stomping of Odin’s boots against the stone floor. Loki moved away quickly to keep himself from being discovered, and was forced to watch as Odin knelt down and scooped up the baby in his hands. Whatever calm the baby had before vanished and he now screamed his little lungs out as Odin held him in his hands. Loki watched as Odin muttered words, too quiet for Loki to hear, and was horrified as the blue of the baby’s skin washed away, leaving only a pale white behind. What made him distinctly Jotun was taken from him within only the first few minutes of his birth.

“L…Loptr,” Laufey gasped. Though the Jotun was in great pain, he was doing his best to overcome it and his eyes were searching for his newborn.

“Is that the name you chose?” Odin asked, not looking up from the babe.

“Y-yes,” he panted. “His name… i-is Loptr.”

“An interesting name,” Odin dismissed. “I am not sure if the people of Asgard will take to it, though. I commend you, though, for birthing one of small size this time. He will be a good match for my Thor.”

This time?

“I curse you and your thrice damned house to the deepest bowels of Hel! You murderous, cantankerous son of a whore!” Farbauti screamed.
“Son of Bor… I beg of you,” Laufey let out a pained gasp. “You have taken the Casket… The battle is done. Please,” his voice was strained, as if he was not used to saying the word, “do not take him as well.”

“Laufey, I do this for peace. Our worlds will be at war until the end of Ragnarok unless we find a solution. Your crown prince Loptr will remain a hostage of Asgard until a time he is of age to wed my Thor. Our kingdoms will unite, Laufey, and your people will live under the guidance of the Aesir as you were meant to.”

The pain of childbirth made Laufey delirious with confusion, otherwise he would not have said what he said next. “H-Helblindi is the crown prince.”

It was then that Loki realized why the children were being held at sword point outside. It was also the moment he realized the significance of the number three in his birth scars… He was the third born to King Laufey.

“Helblindi and Byleistr are of no concern.”

Odin’s words made Farbauti double his attempts to break free and the room shook from his efforts. Laufey’s eyes simply went wide from the implication of Odin’s words.

“Let me hold him,” Laufey demanded. “Let me hold my Loptr.”

Odin made no response.

“Odin, you have any sense of honor or mercy, you will let me hold my son before you take him from me!”

“…It would be best if you did not bond, Laufey. It will only make this harder.”

Laufey did not have time to protest. Odin nodded towards one of his personal guard, who signaled another. From outside of the fortress the screams of two children rang into the night, followed by the outrage and horror of those who witnessed. Farbauti’s rage overcame him and he was finally able to break free, only to have Odin point Gungnir at him. A blast from the weapon sent Loki’s father to the ground, where he screamed no more.

With his work done here, Odin marched towards the exit of the throne room with baby Loptr in his hands. The child’s screams echoed through the room long after the Allfather had disappeared. And so Loki was left alone with King Laufey, forced to watch as his mother fell into a fit of insanity. His kingdom lay in ruins, his mate struck down, his children murdered, and his newborn babe stolen away. And so Loki learned the origin of the Aesir’s title of “Mad King Laufey.”

As for Loki… Well, what can a person do after witnessing such an event. He sat down on the ground and went numb to the world around him. The desperate screams of his mother as well as the sounds of no-doubt more slaughtering outside fell on deaf ears as Loki sat there. His unseeing eyes stared forward as eventually the screams quieted and several Jotnar came to drag his mother away from his dead mate. Laufey was forced to be subdued by their powerful seidr before they could take him away. Not even the sound of Hermes’s voice-- “Lovely Loki.” “Loki.” “Loki! Get up!”--could rouse him.

Hermes was forced to carry Loki back to the fairy ring that would lead them back to the cave. Even when they were once again safely inside of the Cave of Time, Loki would not move or respond. The messenger was beginning to consider taking him back to the healer’s of the palace--consequences be damned--but finally, after so long in silence, Loki said a single word.
“Loptr.”

“Loki?”

He didn’t look to Hermes, but just kept staring forward into nothing.

“My name… it was Loptr… He told me--they all told me--I was abandoned… Laufey wanted to hold me. My mother begged to hold me. A-and my brothers. I had brothers.”

“Loki… I am so sorry.” Hermes stepped closer to take Loki in his arms, but he did not return the embrace. “If I had known, we would have never gone there.”

“It’s all a lie,” he whispered. “Every little thing that has ever been said to me was a lie.”

“Shh… It is alright, Loki,” Hermes whispered and kissed Loki’s temple.

“Everything is a lie,” he repeated it over and over again. All the while Hermes held him through it, waiting for Loki to shed his tears of grief, but they never came. After all that he had seen, Loki wasn’t sure if he could cry anymore.

So ended the adventures of the two tricksters throughout the nine. They had amassed a wealth of treasures from each realm and each time. Trinkets, books, jewels, weapons, oddities and such… but Loki had finally gained what he always wanted: the truth.

He was Loki, née Loptr, stolen prince of Jotunheim. His father had been the great, fearsome warrior Farbauti, “the cruel striker.” His mother was the once great King Laufey, ruler of the harsh world of Jotunheim and driven insane by the loss of all that he loved. He had had brothers, Helblindi and Byleistr; two innocent boy struck down in a war that was not theirs. He was a babe, plucked from his world and stripped of all his identity, remodeled into the shape Odin wanted for control.

He was Loki… and oh, how he hated.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry I got so behind on this, guys! College and life in general has been kicking my ass, but I'm doing my best to get back on track. Hopefully you're still with me and hopefully this doesn't disappoint.

Sorry I didn't do this before but Trigger Warnings for this chapter: Some non/dub-con going on, including fingering, molestation, forced public masturbation, and sexual humiliation.

I apologize for not putting those up before, but I will remember to do so in the future. Thank you for reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When morning finally came on their never-ending day, Hermes had to carry Loki back to his rooms in the palace. He had held Loki through his shaking and his screaming. He held onto Loki, allowing himself to be the other’s lifeline, as the prince of Jotunheim screamed his rage and his grief. To Hermes’s surprise, though, Loki never once shed a tear. He had gone from repeating a single mantra over and over, to shouting until his voice broke, and throwing whatever he could reach around the cavern, but never once did a tear fall. When Loki had finally tired himself out, he fell into a catatonic state and Hermes was able to take him home.

Hermes had wanted to stay with the prince. Actually, he wanted to wrap him up in his cloak and take him back to Olympus, far away from the Aesir, where he would be loved and cherished for the remainder of his days. He knew that he couldn’t, though. Taking Loki would disrupt the delicate truce that Odin shared with his father, and there would no doubt be war if he were to even attempt it. He had come to Asgard with the intention of fulfilling his messenger duties, seeing Loki was merely meant to be a fun detour during his task. He knew that he had to return home before Odin or his father became suspicious of his whereabouts, which meant he had to leave his friend behind. Hermes tried to explain as much to Loki, but whether the prince understood him or not he did not know. Loki said nothing and simply stared forward as Hermes pressed a kiss to his cheek and bid him farewell. As he slipped out of Loki’s room, he had the awful suspicion that he would not be seeing his mischievous friend for some time.

Long after Hermes had departed, Loki simply laid in his bed, staring forward at nothing. The morning hours passed, Hulda and several handmaidens arrived to awaken the prince and get him started on his morning routines. More history lessons with Mimir, tutoring with Frigga about household finances, afternoon sewing with the women of the court, luncheon with Frigga, a late afternoon with Kvasir about the trade negotiations between Asgard and those pesky dwarves of Nidavellir, dinner with the royal family, and if he was very, very good that day, he would get an hour or two to himself to practice his magic.

“-that is, of course, if Thor did not have something special planned for the evening. There had been rumors of a late night stroll through Idunn’s gardens, didn’t you hear? So get up, Loki. You can’t waste all morning in bed. Come now, dear. Why don’t you wear that lovely silk gown that Thor had commissioned for you from Alfheim? It was made by the same seamstress who makes all of
Queen Gerd’s gowns. You would look so lovely…”

Loki tried to tune out maid’s incessant ramblings, but he couldn’t ignore her when Hulda pulled him up by his arm into a sitting position. The maid in front of him continued her inane chatter as two more brought out the gown in question, holding it before him and each commenting on how exquisite it was. He would look so beautiful in his gown, truly the stunning jewel that would perfectly compliment the handsome Thor! All of the ladies of Asgard will be so envious when they see the fine gifts that his betrothed had given him. Wasn’t the prince just so kind?

Loki said nothing. He didn’t even think. His jade eyes were just staring forward, unblinking, unseeing, as the fine silk gown went up in flames in the hands of the two maids. The one who would not stop talking opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came, save for a choking gasp. Loki stared forward, not seeing the woman as she made garbled, strangled noises, her hands reaching to her throat. He didn’t notice a thing as she fell to her knees, clawing at her neck, still struggling for breath as she literally choked on her own words. The other two maids were screaming, doing their best to help the choking woman, but to no avail as her face began to turn blue and blood began to seep from her lips.

All around the room, objects began to shake violently. Books fell from the shelves, furniture toppled over, the glass of the full-length mirror shattered, and the stone walls began to crack. There was screaming all around him, but Loki neither heard, nor cared as he stared forward in his catatonic state. The rage inside of him had taken control over everything, forcing its way out of Loki’s mind and creating chaos all around him. Loki simply let his mind go blank and let it consume him, he let the hatred for everything take over and allowed himself to feel nothing at all. He couldn’t even feel it as the white of his skin faded away, replaced by lined cerulean skin. He couldn’t feel as the sheets of his bed froze and cracked around him, nor the splintering of the wood of the bed-frame. He couldn’t see the terrified look in the maids’ eyes as they stared at his cold, crimson colored gaze. He couldn’t even hear Hulda’s screams of horror as she begged for Loki to stop.

The last thing he saw was his desk by the window going up in flames and the choking maid on the floor finally going still. The last thing he heard was Hulda’s constant screaming for him to stop. The last thing he felt was a harsh blow against the back of his head and then the world around him went black. His rage was finally silenced.

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When Loki finally came to, he realized three unpleasant facts. The first was that he was no longer in his room. He was lying in a much smaller bed in a small, cramped, brick circular room. The room stretched high into the air, up to a wooden vaulted ceiling, with no windows lining the walls. The only entrance that he could see was a lone metal door before his bed, on the opposite side of the room. The sheets of his bed weren’t the fine silk ones that he had always known, but rather rough-spun wool that scratched uncomfortably at his skin.

His second realization was a bit more unsettling than the first. When he tried to sit up in the bed, Loki found that he could not move his limbs. He could open his eyes, move his head, and was most certainly conscious, but when he tried to move his arm or leg, he found that his body would not react. There was no pain anywhere in his body, save for a dull throbbing on the back of his skull, but nothing that would indicate why he couldn’t move his body. Though Loki could feel his heart rate increase at the realization, he tried his best to keep himself calm. The Aesir wouldn’t have done something so brash as paralyzing him, even they weren’t that stupid. It was hard enough
getting the people of Asgard to accept the fact that their golden prince was marrying a Jotun monster. Loki could only imagine the fury that would ensue if they believed that Thor would have to wed a cripple as well. There must be a reasonable explanation to his current predicament. As Loki mulled over said reasonable explanations, he stumbled upon his third horrible realization.

This last realization was that he was not alone in this room. When he turned his head to the left, he saw Asgard’s golden prince seated in a chair, his eyes closed and his head tilted back. Thor’s mouth was open with a string of saliva running out of the corner down to his chin. His hair was tousled and tangled, the braids in the back still hanging on loosely. He wasn’t wearing his usual silver armor or red cape either. Instead he was dressed down in a casual, sleeveless blue tunic, loose black breeches, and no shoes. He had not come to the room dressed so casually and unbefitting of a prince, though. Behind Thor’s chair, Loki could see his chest plate, cape, vambraces, and armored boots piled up on the floor. He had most likely come on the direction of his parents in order to show the people his kind heart by caring for his betrothed. How long he had been sleeping there, waiting for Loki to wake, though, he didn’t know. Nor did he know how long he had been there himself.

Loki opened his mouth to speak, but found that his throat was extremely dry and felt scratchy. Obviously it had been some time since he was last able to use his voice. He tried not to think too hard about it and instead forced himself to speak.

“Thor,” the prince’s name came out little more that a raspy whisper that hardly even reached Loki’s ears. He tried again, this time his words coming a little louder. Thor twitched in his seat, but he didn’t wake.

“Thor!”

This time, his voice came louder than he expected, and a bit more high-pitched than he would have liked. It did the trick, though, and Thor was startled from his sleep. The prince woke with a look of confusion, looking around to take in his surroundings, as if he had forgotten where it was that he had fallen asleep. When he seemed to remember where he was, his eyes immediately shot down to Loki. Loki watched with a blank stare as Thor’s expression went from a mild shock at seeing him awake, to a genuine look of concern. Thor got up from his chair and moved to kneel at Loki’s bedside. He took put one hand gently on the side of Loki’s head, his thumb brushing away the stray hairs from his face, while the other hand took Loki’s. If he could move, the Jotun prince would have recoiled in disgust, but as it was, the control of his body was lost to him for the moment. He had to settle for a glare and take comfort in the fact that he could at least feel the touch, so he knew he was not completely paralyzed.

“Where am I?”


“Speaking is not overexerting myself, fool,” Loki groaned. “Where am I, and how long have I been here?”

If Thor was hurt by Loki’s harsh tone, it did not show for very long. He just kept staring down at Loki with some sort of unrecognizable expression - pity, worry, fondness, he didn’t know - as he petted his hair like some sort of nervous colt.

“You’re in a private room of Eir’s healing chamber.”

“And how long have I been here?”
“Since you were forced to be sedated.”

*Sedated?* Loki thought. The Aesir had strange notions of sedation if the throbbing in his skull was anything to go by.

“Be more specific, Thor.”

“Five days now. Unless the sun has already set, in which case it would be the sixth day. I’ve not left your side since Eir determined you would not be a danger to yourself or anyone else.” He smiled down at Loki, as if he were expecting some sort of praise for his devotion. When he didn’t receive it, the smile faded.

“What do you remember?” Thor asked.

*Everything I was ever told was a lie.* Loki couldn’t say this, of course. So he went with the obvious answer instead.

“I remember being in my room. Things were shaking and catching fire, a maid was choking, Hulda was screaming, and then pain. Nothing else.”

“Yes,” he nodded. “Hulda was very sorry about that. She didn’t mean to hurt you, but she didn’t know what else to do. You gave everyone quite the fright… I am very sorry, Loki. I had no idea that the effects would be so severe.”

“What are you talking about, Thor?”

“For Norn’s sake, what condition are you talking about?” Loki groaned. Sometimes it was like talking to a brick wall with Thor.

“That night, in the courtyard when we…,” he let himself trail off and Loki had to fight not to roll his eyes at the tiny smirk that played at the corner of his lips. “When we… got to know each other a little better, it triggered your hysteria.”

“Hysteria?”

“You don’t know the term?” Thor asked, confused. “I am told it is quite common among women. I didn’t know that it would be possible with you, but I sometimes forget that with your Jotun biology, you possess a womb as well.”

*You forget that I have a womb, yet whenever we’re together more than ten minutes, you always make reference to my cunt.* “Go on.”

“When I brought about your…release it must have triggered the effects of all of the retention of your female semen.”

“…My what?”

Thor’s face flushed red and he had the decency to look away embarrassed. “What have your tutors been teaching you?” He muttered. “Like the male body, the female contains semen, that mingles with the male’s during intercourse. It is then stored in the womb. But it has to be released regularly, or else it will turn toxic and venomous. This toxic female semen can cause irritability, mood-swings, faintness, and… let’s say a tendency to cause trouble. For some reason it was very
severe in your case and caused your seidr to react wildly.”

When Thor was done with his explanation Loki just stared at him blankly, waiting for the punch-line of this strange joke. When it never came, Loki still managed to burst out laughing over the ridiculousness of it all. Here he was in the supposedly most advanced realm in all of Yggdrasil, under the care of the finest physician that Asgard had to offer, and they were still blaming his emotions on his Jotun nature. Not just his being a Jotun, though, but for his possession of a womb as well! By Ymir, how do the women of this realm stand this!? Loki had very likely killed a member of the staff and set fire to parts of his room, and Thor believed it was because of - what apparently was - a passionate night with Loki’s doppelganger. It was all just too absurd to handle.

“Loki?” Thor appeared to be concerned again. No doubt he was attributing the sudden change in Loki’s mood to his hysteria. Still, he continued to laugh as Thor moved to sit next to him on the bed and leaned down to kiss the top of his head.

“I did not mean to cause you harm,” Thor apologized again.

“No, you never mean to, do you?” Loki spat.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“All of the times you’ve crouched me against a wall, forced a kiss on me, struck me, or wrapped your hand around my throat; all of those times were never meant to hurt me. Surely the great Thor would never wish to harm his Jotun prize.”

Much to Loki’s surprise, Thor did not lose his temper right away as he expected. Instead, he could hear Thor take three deep breaths before he spoke again.

“Flyting was always your forte.”

“You’ve given me ample practice, my prince.”

“Be that as it may, I will not be baited by it this time. Not while you are ill.”

“Why, Thor? No sport in it for you to fight against one who can’t defend themselves? It never really stopped you before in all our years together.”

“…Why do you hate me so much, Loki?” Thor tilted Loki’s chin up so that he could look into his eyes as he spoke. There was a kind of sadness there that Loki was not used to seeing. It made him uncomfortable, to say the least.

“Why should I have to love you?”

“Please don’t answer my question with another question,” he said seriously. “Loki…we are to be married one day. I know that it is not something that you’re particularly looking forward to - Norns know that I despised the fact when I first learned of it - but we are not children anymore, Loki. You are still in your youth, but you will be coming of age soon enough. You are getting to be too old for your childish rebellions.

“This is what we were made to do, Loki. We were made to shoulder the responsibilities of our kingdoms, it is our duty as princes of our realms. By wedding, we will finally bring peace between our peoples and make Yggdrasil stronger than ever before. We owe it to all of the nine realms to take on that responsibility. You may not have to love me, you don’t even have to like me if I disgust you so much, but I ask that you at least attempt to be civil. If not for my sake, then for the sake of all the lives in the world tree who are depending on us.”
Loki was, for once, stunned into silence. This was a side of Thor that he had never knew existed, let alone never seen before. This was Thor actually behaving like the prince that he was. He spoke civilly, yet forcefully, about responsibilities and the welfare of the realms in a tone that seemed to command respect. For a moment, Loki could see what others apparently saw in Thor. This was the dutiful prince who they had given their hearts to. The one who smiled his bright smile and spoke his golden words until he held the trust of everyone around. Odin had trained his son well… but Loki had seen the ugliness that lay beneath his bright smile and kind blue eyes. A few honeyed words and a couple of kind gestures did not erase centuries of Thor’s arrogance and abuse. Nor did it wipe away the sins of his father.

“I have tried civility with you, Thor. The only problem is that you take my civility as permission to force yourself on me.”

“You are my betrothed,” he replied, as if that justified his actions. “It is expected that we will consummate our relationship one day. I have tried to ease you into this by making my intentions clear—”

“By assaulting me?”

Thor grit his teeth before continuing on. “By giving you gifts and expressing my desire to get closer to you. You are very beautiful, clever, and - when you are not insulting - quite funny. I like you. I may even grow to love you one day, if you could learn to put aside your discontent and accept the future that fate has decided for us.”

“You mean the future that your father has decided for me,” Loki scoffed.

“Do not be that way, Loki,” Thor warned. “Hysteria or not, you should not speak against my father - your benefactor - in such a way. If not for him, you would have died cold an alone, abandoned by your own people. It is because of him that you will someday be Queen of the greatest realm in all of Yggdrasil. You should be grateful for all that he has given you.”

Oh, if Thor only knew how lucky he was that Loki could not move his limbs at the moment. The younger prince was blinded by his rage over Thor’s ignorant words and would likely have ripped his head from his shoulders, even without the help of his seidr. As was, though, all he could do was turn his head away from him, so that he didn’t have to look upon Thor and see the seriousness behind his words.

“A lovely story that he has told many times, I’ve no doubt,” Loki laughed bitterly. “He probably even believes it himself.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, Thor,” Loki laughed bitterly. “Always so clueless. Why don’t you ask your father to tell you the story of how he found me again. This time, though, be sure to ask about Helblindi and Byleistr.” Thor looked confused. “What? He’s left those two characters out of his tale? They are very central to the story, let me tell you. And then of course there is the star of this tale, little Loptr—”

“Loki.”

“Not even a minute out of the comfort of his dam’s womb, still covered in placenta before he was snatched up—”

“Loki, you’re not making any sense,” Thor snapped.
Loki’s voice was raising to a shrill level. “Snatched up from the floor, never even felt the comfort of his mother’s skin before he was bled white!”

“Loki!”

Thor got up from the bed and began to shake Loki by his shoulders, as if he could somehow shake the rising madness out of him. Loki let himself be handled like a rag-doll, but he didn’t let it stop his words.

“His mother forced to watch as everything was taken away. Never once getting to hold little Loptr! No matter how much he begged and cried for it! Did he care, though? Did he so much as blink when the children screamed and their mother cried!?"

“Loki!” Thor roared in his face. “What are you talking about?”

“Ask him, Thor!”

“I don’t unders-”

“Ask him!” Loki screamed. “Maybe for once in his damned life he’ll tell you the truth! That cantankerous, murderous, son of a whore-”

Whatever else Loki was about to say was cut off by Thor’s hand striking cruelly against his cheek. Pain bloomed on his cheekbone and no doubt a bruise would be forming there soon enough. Outside the walls, the sound of thunder blared so loudly that the room seemed to shake from the force of it. Thor’s chest was heaving, his eyes as dark as his storm brewing outside, and he looked as if he was preparing himself for another strike. Loki saw the way his raised, open hand shook, just waiting for the chance to deliver another blow.

Loki smiled wickedly. “Ask him, Thor. Ask your father what he really did during the war.”

Thor’s brows furrowed in his anger and he pulled his hand back to prepare for the strike. Before the hand could fall, though, the creak of the metal door stopped him. Thor looked quickly over his shoulder and saw his father standing in the doorway, his expression blank as he took in the scene before him.

“Speak of the devil and he shall appear,” Loki laughed. Thor did not understand his reference. Neither did Loki truly understand it, for that matter. It was some Midgardian term that he had picked up on his travels. It seemed fitting for the situation, though.

“Thor,” Odin spoke, “what is going on here?”

Thor quickly stepped away from the bed and put his hand down by his side. “I’m sorry, father. Loki has just woken and he was having another bout of hysteria. I wasn’t sure what to do. He was speaking in riddles and-”

“I was regaling your son with the most wonderful story, Allfather,” Loki interrupted. “Perhaps you could join in, since you know the tale as well. It is the story of two young boys, Helblindi and Byleistr.”

Odin’s face remained stoic as he stepped further into the room. His one eye shifted from Thor down to Loki, still smirking like a madman in his bed. After a long, tense moment, he broke the gaze and returned his attention to his son.

“Thor, fetch Eir. If Loki is succumbing to his hysteria, then you will need her assistance for
“Can it wait, father? He seems stable now, but I do not want to leave him if should need me.”

“Oh let him stay,” Loki pretended to pout. “He wants to hear the story just as badly as I do.”

“Thor, I will not ask you twice. Go,” Odin commanded in a tone that Thor would be fool to question.

The prince nodded to his father. He looked back to Loki and gave one last affectionate caress against his bruising cheek before he turned to leave the room. Odin watched him go and did not turn back until the door slammed closed. Loki waited patiently, smiling as he waited to hear the story. Odin’s one good eye narrowed as he stared the prince down, not saying a word, but just waiting for Loki to stop his manic grinning. When he didn’t, though, Odin sighed heavily.

“Where did you learn those names?” Odin finally asked.

“Which ones, Allfather?” Loki feigned ignorance. “Helblindi and Byleister? Or perhaps the name Loptr?”

“All of them,” Odin answered. “Who told you those names?”

“What does it matter where I learned the names? All of the boys are still dead, murdered by your hand, no matter how much you try to hide away your sins,” Loki snarled. “You’re a father, so tell me; how could you live with yourself after commanding the slaughter of two innocent children? Or sleep at night after hearing a newborn cry out for the touch of his dam? Were you born with no heart that you could walk away from a mother as he screamed for his children?”

“Hulda says that you were always a precocious child. One for making up wild stories and fantasies. I suppose that was normal, for your isolation in your youth, that you would concoct imaginary tales to entertain yourself. This story you’ve created, however, goes far beyond your mischievous child’s play.”

“Oh no,” Loki snapped, “you do not dare attempt to deny this. You may have your kingdom fooled, but you will not lie to me, Odin! After all of the indignities I’ve suffered at your hands, you will not deny me the truth now, you coward.”

“Indignities?” Odin huffed. “You’ve lived a life of luxury. Fostered by the ruler of the greatest of the realms, educated by the greatest minds in Yggdrasil, lavished with gifts from all the Nine, and set to become a ruler yourself. Tell me, Loki, where is the indignity in all of this?”

“Pretty gifts and even prettier titles,” Loki laughed. “Is that how you managed to have Gullveig finally submit to you?”

Odin’s eye widened for a fraction of a moment in surprise, and Loki knew that he had caught him off guard. More than that, he had hit a nerve.

“Forgive me, she is known as Frigga now,” Loki smiled. “I have been meaning to ask when exactly she changed her name. Was it before or after you dragged her from her home in Vanahelm in chains? Ah - no matter. The question is, though, what made a seidkonur so strong-willed that even death could not claim her submit to your will? Did you lavish your beloved with the same kind of affection that your son does to me until she finally learned her place? Of course, that is assuming that she has learned her place. I’ve seen the way she looks at you, Allfather. That concealed rage, the contempt lying beneath that calm exterior. I know that you are missing an eye, but are you truly blind as to how much she despises yo-”
Loki’s words are cut off by the hand of the Allfather wrapping around his throat and squeezing so tight Loki could not breathe. There was a rage in Odin’s eye that Loki had never seen before, one that surpasses even the madness in Thor’s beserker rage. This is not the king of Asgard, revered throughout the Nine for his great wisdom. This is the king who fought and conquered the Nine. This is the king who burned Vanahem in his youth, who aided Queen Alflyse in her destruction of Malekith, who tore through the ice kingdoms of Jotunheim until all that was left was a barren wasteland. Loki was so happy to finally meet this king. It had been a long time coming.

“Say one more word about her, Liesmith, and I will snap your neck. Understand?”

Loki could not speak, nor could he move his limbs to get Odin off of him, so he merely blinked in response. Odin took this to be a ‘yes’ and released the younger man. Loki took a deep inhale of air and tried not to cough. As many times as Thor wrapped his burly hands around his neck, Loki was becoming quite the expert in how to recover from strangulation. Oh the joys that life brings… Once his breathing was back under control, though, Loki saw that Odin was still standing over him with that pure look of hatred. He returned the king’s gaze and waited for what he had to say. Loki knew that if he pushed enough, he could bait the truth out of the old man. Now it was time to lay back and reap his reward.

“So, the ungrateful child wants to know the truth? Fine, then. We will see how much good it does for you… The numbers of Jotunheim were growing beyond the count of measure. Your species damned ability to reproduce through both partners combined with the natural longevity of their lives led to overpopulation. The Casket of Ancient Winters allowed for the manipulation of the elements to adapt to the growing population, but even so, resources would always be limited in these types of situations.

“To solve the problem, Laufey turned to Midgard. The nature of this realm varies from the other eight by being able to support multiple climates at once, so Laufey believed he could annex portions of the realm that contained a natural winter environment. It would have served as a home for the excess of Frost Giants that Jotunheim was producing until they could come up with another solution as to how to control the population. Midgard is my protectorate, I would not have the mortals of the realm suffer from the abuse of the Frost Giants.”

Loki recalled his travel with Hermes and thought about his encounters with the island cultures in the realm’s Pacific. The people there weren’t victims of abuse from conquering Giant overlords. They had revered the Jotuns and worshiped them as their gods. They marked their flesh to emulate them and harness their seidr. He couldn’t explain this to Odin, though. What would be the point? He fears the Olympians for the same reason that he feared Jotunheim gaining an ounce of control over Midgard; his hold was threatened, as well as his monopoly over all of the Nine. Loki bit his tongue, though, and allowed for the Allfather to continue.

“Laufey and Farbauti led the invasion while wielding the Casket. They used it to acclimate the realm to suit the needs of the Frost Giants… Hundreds of mortals died in the process, but your parents did not care. You think me heartless? The mortals had families and children as well. Children who suffered cold and cruel deaths at the hands of your kin. Are you not outraged for them as well?”

Loki didn’t answer.

“I thought as much,” he sneered. “Our forces fought them on the battlegrounds of Midgard at first. By then, Laufey had adapted the Casket as a weapon and many were killed in the crossfire: mortals, Aesir, and Giant… We managed to drive them back into their realm, but it wasn’t enough. I knew that Laufey would bide his time and try again, or worse, make an attack against Asgard
itself. So we struck preemptively. When Laufey was heavy with his pregnancy, we entered Jotunheim through the Bifrost. For three months, our forces clashed with every able-bodied Frost Giant on the outskirts of Utgard until we were able to fight our way into the city gates. Helblindi and Byleistr, your brothers, were discovered hidden in the underground tunnels with thirty members of the royal guard. After their slaughter, the Einherjar used the boys to gain access into the palace.

“The royal guard laid down their weapons and led us to the throne room. We heard the screaming long before we reached the throne room. A sound of unimaginable pain, the likes of which I’d never heard before, nor quite since. Laufey was sitting on his throne, clutching the Casket. I had thought him wounded at first, but when I saw the blood seeping from between his legs, I realized that he was giving birth. Farbauti was guarding him during the labor. He killed five of my Einherjar before one managed to press a knife to Laufey’s stomach. He calmed quite a bit when he saw his mate and their child in danger and allowed himself to be subdued. The Casket was taken from Laufey and he was removed from the throne… and the rest of the story, you somehow seem to know,” Odin said as he narrowed his eye down at the young man.

“I know the basics,” Loki agreed. “I do not know the reason… Why? You were knee-deep in Jotun blood. Why would you take me?”

“You were an innocent child,” Odin reasoned.

“But don’t you dare!” Loki shouted. “My brothers were innocent children and that did not stop you from having their throats cut! Why didn’t you just cut me from Laufey’s womb and smash my head against a rock? Destroy Laufey’s line once and for all and install your own puppet-king. Why bind me to your house, to your son?… Tell me!”

Surprisingly, Odin merely laughed at Loki’s outburst. It is a soft, almost tired laugh, one that drives Loki nearly mad at its relaxed manner.

“What would you know of war, Loki? What would you know of the working of the realms… This battle between Asgard and Jotunheim has been ongoing since the creation of our realms, and it will only continue and worsen until the end of Ragnarok when our worlds will destroy each other… Despite what you want to believe is true, I am not a complete monster. I would spare our worlds if I could… I will admit that the thought crossed my mind - when your mother was lying on the floor, bleeding, screaming for hours as you forced your way from him - to cut Laufey’s throat as well and be done with it. But if I had done so, Jotunheim would have rebelled and sought vengeance, the war would never have ended. The only answer was to unite our kingdoms, bring about an alliance and permanent peace, through you. As for your brothers… sacrifice is often required in times of war. It is regrettable that they had to die so young, but if they had been kept alive, the alliance could not come to fruition. A third-born runt of a king is nothing in the line of succession. The only surviving child of the king, however, gains the throne… Laufey still rules in Jotunheim, but you remain his only living heir. To ensure your continued safety, he will not dare to raise a finger against Asgard, nor any of the Nine, no matter what his own kin say. The children you will bear for Thor will one day inherit both Asgard and Jotunheim, and the two worlds will finally live in peace.”

When Odin was finally done, Loki just laid his head back and moved his eyes to stare up to the ceiling. He let Odin’s words sink in on him. If Loki were a rational person, he would admit that, on paper, Odin’s plan had its own merits. He had wrecked Laufey to the point of madness, while at the same time giving the mad king a small sliver of hope, to ensure his cooperation and submission. Loki knew all along that Odin’s purpose for him was this horrendous thing, born from the king’s desire for control, but to hear him actually admit it with such a level of conviction in his
voice was unsettling. Loki is not an idiot, he knows that in war, atrocities are sometimes committed. Even necessary evils, however, will weigh on a person’s soul, and that regret and shame will be there. Loki knows… he saw it on the face of every Midgardian warrior he came into contact with. He saw it on Captain Rogers… When he looks at Odin, though, he sees no such regret. He sees no shame of the past, no haunted look in his eyes, or anything that would prove that the man had something akin to a soul. All he saw was a man who believed himself to be a hero in his own mind, who thought that every action he took was the correct one because it led to the results he wanted. He saw a man who slept peacefully at night, despite the Jotun blood drenching his hands. But, oh, it will be so much worse when Loki is through with him.

“Does it make you feel better now, to know the truth? Does it ease your pain at all or make any sort of difference in your situation?”

“If you felt your actions to be so right, then why not tell your people the truth? Why have them believe me to be a cast-off that Laufey never cared for?”

“…You know nothing,” Odin scoffed.

“Does Frigga know?”

At that Odin bent down low over Loki so that his grey eye stared directly into Loki’s. “I don’t know how you came to discover your true name, or that of your brothers, but believe me when I say that my eye will always be upon you now, Loki. There is not a place in all of Yggdrasil you can hide from my gaze… So if you ever even think to breathe a word of what I have told you today, to anyone at all, I will have your lips sewn shut to protect Asgard from your lies. Your place in my household hangs only by a thread, Frost Giant. Imagine what the people would do to you if they discovered you to be a liar against their king.”

“I imagine that one day we will find out.” Loki sneered back at Odin, and felt a sense of satisfaction come over him when he saw the old man’s face begin to flush red with his anger.

Odin looked as if he was going to say more, but before he had the chance, the door to the room began to open. The Allfather quickly composed himself and backed away from the bed as Thor walked through the door, Eir trailing in behind him. The older woman’s head was tilted downwards, but her eyes were up, shifting from Odin to Loki. She bowed gently to her king and gave Loki a warm, matronly smile as she walked to the side of the bed.

“Hello, Loki. It is good to see you finally awake,” she said softly. Her warm brown eyes began to trail over him when he saw the old man’s face begin to flush red with his anger.

“Waking in a strange place after sleeping for so long will confuse anyone, my prince. Especially when one has suffered a wound to the head, as Loki has. She was wise not to mention them, though. “You appear to be in much better condition than when you were first brought to me.”

“I thought the same as well,” Thor spoke up, “but he began speaking in riddles and behaving like a madman. We feared that he was succumbing to his hysteria again.”

“I would not be so sure,” Odin interjected. “Perhaps you should perform your treatment as a precaution.”

“Waking in a strange place after sleeping for so long will confuse anyone, my prince. Especially when one has suffered a wound to the head, as Loki has. He appears to be in good condition now.”

“I will go, but Thor will stay.”
“M- my king, this treatment is very sensitive and private… I am sure that Prince Loki will greatly appreciate it if he were allowed the privacy for the sake of his modesty.”

“Nonsense, Loki is my son’s betrothed, there is no need for him to feel modest in his presence. Besides, Thor should learn how to treat the hysteria, should Loki’s mischief begin to increase.” Odin’s eye shifted from Eir to Loki, giving the prince a pointed look. “Should such an even occur, Thor will then be equipped to handle the situation, no matter what.”

Whatever he was on about, it gave Loki a sinking feeling in his gut. Eir looked as if she was biting her tongue to keep herself from snapping something she would regret, and Odin looked far too pleased with himself. This spelt trouble for Loki.

“…Of course, Allfather. A wonderful suggestion.”

“Glad that we are agreed. I will take my leave, then. Thor, should your mother and I expect you at the tables tonight?”

“No, father,” Thor shook his head. “I will stay here until Loki is healed.”

“Then by all means, do feel well again soon, Loki.”

The Allfather smiled down to Loki and finally took his leave, slamming the door closed behind him. Once he was gone, Eir let out a deep sigh and rubbed her fingers over her forehead. She didn’t say anything for a time, despite Thor looking at her curiously, waiting for whatever instructions she would give him. Eir took another deep breath and released it before she turned to look down at Loki, giving the younger man a forced smile. She lowered herself down to sit on the small, empty portion of the bed. She took his limp hand in her own and squeezed gently.

“I am sorry that you were forced to be immobilized, dear,” she told him gently. “We did not want to risk your seidr losing control again. When the treatment is done… well, I will make sure that we counter the effects and you will be back to yourself in no time at all.”

“What exactly do you intend to do to me?” Loki narrowed his eyes at her in suspicion.

His relationship with Eir was a casual one. He had seen her mostly in his youth, and he knew that when she was trying to lull him into a sense of security it was to prepare him for something much worse. Like when he was little and she would give him a lemon cake before having him drink a foul tasting concoction that would supposedly help with his sensitivity to Asgard’s warm climate. What did she have planned for him now?

“This is a common procedure, Loki. It is done often for many woman, and I promise you that it will not be painful.” She squeezed his hand a little harder at that. “Just relax and it will be over soon.”

“If your words are meant to calm me, they are not working.”

“Leave her be,” Thor said in a warning tone. “She is trying to help you.”

“Thank you, my prince… Alright, Thor - since your father insisted that you be a part of this - I will walk you through what you must do. Sit at the foot of the bed.”

Thor nodded and did as he was told, sitting down next to Loki’s feet. Already, Loki saw things as going very badly from here. The fears were confirmed when Eir slowly let go of his and removed the sheet that was covering his body. Loki looked down, relieved to see that he was at least clothed and wasn’t completely exposed, but the white gown he was dressed in only reached his knees.
Whatever relief he did have, though, was taken away when he saw Eir’s shaky hands move the gown up towards his hips.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Eir didn’t answer. The gown was up to his mid-thigh now. “Stop!”

Again she didn’t answer, and Loki was speechless when she lifted the gown over his hips and the cool air fell on his limp member. Thor looked mildly surprised at the direction this was taking as well, but he didn’t look away from it in embarrassment. His eyes stayed transfixed on Loki’s shaft, almost admiring. It’s not like Thor had not seen it before - well, he had seen his doppleganger’s. That was dark, though. In the light of the room, he could see how smooth and hairless Loki was. The skin was a light, creamy color with a rosy pink at the tip. Though Thor did not have much experience with male genitalia, other than his own, he could admit that it was a pretty cock. Not much girth, but a decent length. Loki felt the burn of rage and shame as he lay there under those observing eyes.

“Whatever you intend to do, I greatly suggest that you reconsider,” Loki growled.

“…This must be done, Prince Loki,” Eir replied. The words ‘I’m sorry’ were implied by her tone, but Loki did not give a damn about her apologies. Not when she was pulling his legs apart and brushing his cock to the side, to expose his vagina.

“Stop this. Now!”

“Please be calm, Loki,” she shushed. “This won’t hurt.”

“I don’t care! Don’t touch me!” If he could, Loki would have kicked out at her, but his limbs were weighed down by whatever magics she had placed on him.

Seeing as she could not force Loki to relax, she turned her attention back to Thor. When she called his name, it took a moment for the prince to draw his eyes away from Loki’s groin. She had Thor push his thighs further apart so that he would open to them. Loki had to choke back on a scream when he felt those calloused fingers on his skin.

“Good,” Eir nodded.

She pulled some sort of vial from her apron, and Loki saw the yellow oil inside. His eyes widened and he felt his heart-rate quicken. When Eir handed the vial to Thor, Loki desperately tried to call to his seidr. He could feel it thrumming through his veins, rushing through him and begging to be released. Like with his limbs, though, there was some kind of invisible weight pressing down on him from within, keeping everything trapped inside. He could feel the build inside of him - his magic desperately trying to break free from its confines while at the same time, the weight pushed back, forcing it all down. Loki’s skin began to grow hot from the internal struggle and his mind was becoming sluggish. The harder he tried to force it out, the stronger the resistance was, until it pushed so hard that Loki cried out from the pain of it.

“Easy, Loki. It is alright. I won’t hurt you,” Thor’s voice tried to calm him.

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“Alright, Loki,” she turned to him briefly, “Thor is going to give you a pelvic massage. He will go slow and easy, and it will be over soon. Thor,” she said to the prince, “very gently, put your hand
on Loki’s genitals.”

“Don’t you touch me!” Loki spat.

Thor ignored him in favor for Eir’s command. The oiled hand came to rest against his vagina and Loki bit down on his lip to keep himself from screaming. Despite all of the years of harassment from Thor, this was the one thing that he had been able to keep him from doing. Through defending himself with force and trickery, Loki had somehow managed to successfully keep his betrothed from touching him in this manner, giving Loki some semblance of power in this disturbing relationship. It was the one thing that he still controlled between them. Now it was being taken away… And the very worst of it was that Thor being gentle!

The slicked fingers ran slowly over his folds, spreading the oil on his skin as Eir had instructed. Loki cursed at Thor and threatened to break off his fingers, but the prince paid him no mind, no doubt blaming his ‘hysteria’ for the outburst. He kept his blue eyes transfixed at his handiwork, at the shine of the oil against Loki’s smooth cunt. Once Eir told him that Loki appeared slick enough, Thor’s middle finger gently ran along the slit, slowly coaxing Loki to respond. The Jotun prince was horrified to discover that he actually was.

Though he often thought about it, Loki had never been touched in this manner before. His awkward experimentations with his own sexuality was often limited to fondling his cock. It had felt good, sending a white hot bliss up his spine that made him shiver and cry out. He assumed that it would be the same with his female sex, but he had never bothered to experiment with it. He’d heard stories from Sigyn and the women in the sewing circle how the penetration of their sex would hurt the first time, tearing something inside of them. It had frightened him, to be honest. What was happening now, though, it wasn’t painful. Quite the opposite, actually. Thor’s rough fingers slowly ran up and down his labia, giving him a warm, tingling sensation that felt good. As Thor worked his fingers, Loki felt another kind of wetness that he could not attribute to the oil.

Thor’s fingers ran up his opening labia until they touched the small nub that made Loki hiss from the sensation. He thought he heard a chuckle from Thor and was set to spit a nasty curse at him, but the fingers began to move in a circular motion over his clitoral hood. Loki mumbled every vile, horrid word he could imagine as his chest began to heave, his breath coming in pants. He hated this. He hated that it felt so good. He hated that something like this felt so good and that it was coming from Thor. He hated the prince, more than he ever thought could be imaginable. Damn him, damn Eir for just sitting there and instructing him, and damn the whole of Asgard for putting him here!

When a soft cry escaped from him, Loki squeezed his eyes shut tightly, as if it could somehow make everything around him disappear. All it did, though was heighten his senses. The sensation from the cluster of nerves in his clitoris sent electric sparks throughout his body. The wetness was spreading to his thighs and as Thor’s fingers ran down his labial folds, he felt one slip inside. He couldn’t tell if the next cry that fell from his lips was from the sensation of it, or from the anguish of it all.

“Try to relax your breathing, Loki,” Eir said gently. “You’re doing well. It is almost done… Thor, you need to massage inside the vaginal walls and keep the heel of your palm against him.”

“Yes, Lady Eir,” Thor agreed. His voice sounded more like a growl. Loki knew that tone. Thor often used it when he pressed his betrothed against a wall and demanded a kiss. The prince was becoming aroused. As much as he hated her in this moment, Loki was grateful for Eir’s presence. He didn’t want to imagine what would happen if she wasn’t there.

“...G-go to - ngh! - Hel,” Loki panted.

Just then Thor crooked the fingers inside of him and pressed against something that made him outright scream. He didn’t have to look to know that Thor was smiling. He could faintly hear Eir saying something to the prince, but Loki’s senses were overwhelmed by the way those fingers crooked into him, moving slowly in and out as the heel of his palm moved in a circular motion against his clitoris. It felt excruciatingly good, more powerful than the times he had played with his cock. The thought of how good it felt, though, only sickened him to his core. He did not want this! He did not want a touch this intimate and wonderful to come from someone he despised so much. As Thor massaged his inner walls and rubbed his clitoris, Loki had to play in his mind every insult Thor had ever given him, every time he had forced himself upon him, every time he struck Loki for daring to deny him. Loki needed those images in his mind. He needed to hold on to them like a life-line, saving him from becoming lost in this moment and giving Thor the one thing he swore he never would; his compliance.

“How does it feel, Loki?” Thor asked again. His voice was lower than before and breathy. His hand was moving quicker now, to which Loki felt mild relief. Maybe it would be over soon. “Does it feel good, beloved?”

I will kill you! Loki mentally screamed. He couldn’t say the words aloud. The only sound to come from him were small cries and heated gasps. He was afraid that if he tried to speak, all that would come out would be words of encouragement. The last thing he wanted was for Thor to believe that he enjoyed his touch.

With his eyes closed, though, Loki could not see how Thor’s free hand wrapped itself around his now swollen cock. Loki cried out so loud, he was afraid that everyone in the palace.

“Thor!” Eir chastised. “That is not necessary. His male organ is not in need of your treatment.”

“How can you be so sure, my lady? You’ve not had many Frost Giants to practice your healing arts on. His female semen is what we know to be toxic, but it may very well be his male semen as well.”

Thor’s hand began to pump Loki’s cock in a slow rhythm, his thumb sweeping over the head. Thor’s hand was dry and it chaffed Loki as he worked his hand over him. It was painfully obvious that Thor had never done this for another man before. His hand went too fast, squeezed too tightly that whatever good feeling came from his thumb rubbing gentle circles over the head was counter-balanced by the discomfort. It was good to be reminded of the pain, though. It kept his head level.

There was a pressure building inside of Loki, one that he recognized as a sign of release. Thank the Norns! It was almost over. There was a disgusting squelching sound as Thor’s finger’s moved in and out at a fast pace, each time making sure to crook inside of him to hit that particular spot. The pressure continued to build until finally - finally - he felt his quim clench around Thor’s fingers and his orgasm took him completely. Loki tilted his head back and opened his mouth, allowing himself this one opportunity show signs of his pleasure. It couldn’t be helped, really. The release from his female organ was more intense than he could have imagined, and when he finally opened his eyes, all he could see was a blinding white light.

Loki could feel his body vibrating, wanting to shake from his release, but unable to move. When he regained his vision, he saw that Thor was still working his shaft with a look of concentration, as if wondering how he had not managed to make Loki orgasm from it yet. Loki breathed heavily and tried to relax himself, willing for Thor to just be done with it. It was another few moments until the time finally came, and Loki spilt his seed with a grunt.
It was finally done. Loki could cry from the relief of it, but at the moment, he was too focused on trying to return his mind to a level of clarity. He felt light-headed, his vision swimming as if he had drunk too much mead. He could breathe easier when he finally felt Thor’s fingers withdraw from him. To his extreme shame, though, all he could feel against his sex now was a cold wetness that spread to his thighs. Thor was grinning down at him, admiring his handiwork. It was that damnable, cocky grin that made Loki want to claw at his face until he hit the bone.

Loki opened his mouth, ready to let the curses spew forth, but Eir’s hand on his leg stopped him.

“It is done now, Loki. You did very well,” she said in a soft tone. Her brown eyes stared deep into his, silently telling him to remain still. “It is done.”

“I must say, the treatment for this illness is quite interesting,” Thor laughed. “I am thankful for your…tutorship, Lady Eir. It gladdens me to know that I will be able to treat Loki, should he need help… Will he require this treatment often?”

Loki’s eyes widened for a moment in panic. Eir saw it and ran her fingers soothingly along his leg.

“Only if his symptoms should act up again. If he begins having fits of madness or mischief, then he will require your assistance. If you attempt when he is in a calm state, the effects may be reversed and he could have another episode; perhaps more violent than the last.”

“I see,” Thor nodded. Though he tried to hide it, his eyes showed his disappointment. Loki did his best not to sneer.

“The treatment can be tiring, and Prince Loki appears to be more stable now. You may leave if you wish, my prince. I will clean him and leave him to rest.”

“My place is here with him until he is well again,” Thor answered. “You may go, Lady Eir. We have taken enough of your time as it is. I’ve no doubt that others have need of your help.”

“As you say, my prince.” Eir bowed her head and stood from the bed. When she reached the door, she turned and gave Loki one last strained smile before leaving him alone again with Thor.

Loki was thankful that Thor did not attempt to engage him in conversation. Instead the prince went to a table on the opposite side of the room. On top there lay a water basin and cloth. Thor grabbed both and came back to sit on the bed next to Loki. Green eyes followed the prince’s movements closely as Thor dipped the cloth into the water to make it damp. He pressed the cloth against Loki’s brow, wiping the sweat that had formed there, and - though Loki was loathe to admit it - he appreciated the gesture. The water cooled his flush skin, making him feel less nauseous than before and helped to calm his nerves… The calm faded, though when Thor caught his glance and gave him a fond smile. Loki kept his expression blank.

When he was done wiping the sweat, Thor dipped the cloth again and moved down to Loki’s groin. He wiped the cloth at the sticky fluid that had landed on his hipbone. Loki looked away, fearing that he was going to be sick just from seeing it. He felt Thor wipe around his hips, cleaning whatever ejaculate may have fallen on him. He hissed, though, when the rough texture of the cloth pressed against his limp cock, and he was reminded again how chaffed his member had become from the rough treatment of Thor’s hands.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I suppose that you are still sensitive there.”

Loki didn’t answer.

“Will you always be so quiet afterwards?” Thor asked. Loki gave him a questioning look. “That
night, I thought your silence to be just from the shock of experiencing your first release. You wouldn’t say anything, but just kept staring forward, as if you weren’t really there. You are the same now… You don’t have to be, though. You can speak freely with me, Loki. You always have.”

No, I can’t. Not anymore.

“I am tired, Thor,” Loki answered. “My head still hurts and I just want to rest.”

“I understand,” he smiled.

The cloth thankfully moved away from his cock, but unfortunately it was so that Thor could clean the wetness and oil from his cunt. He was surprised to find that he was still incredibly sensitive there. The skin tingled as Thor cleaned him, though the sensation of it was dulled in comparison to what he had experienced. Still, it was enough to make him whimper at the slight twitch that he felt. His female sex was a curious thing. A curious, and at the moment, traitorous, thing.

“A… Are you feeling alright, though? Other than the fatigue… I mean, do you feel calmer now?”

“Yes, Thor,” he answered immediately. It was what the oaf wanted to hear.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he said in a softer, kinder tone. He even threw in a shy smile to convince the prince. Anything just to get the man to shut up. “I feel… strange, but somehow more peaceful.”

“That is good,” Thor smiled. “I do not like it when you are unwell.”

“Hopefully I will not fall under this madness again.” Then I will not have to feel your touch on me again.

“We will have to see.”

Thor finished cleaning Loki and threw the cloth into the water basin. Loki had hoped that Thor would be done with him now and just leave him in peace, but Thor was never one to give Loki any kind of reprieve. The golden prince placed the basin on the floor then moved Loki’s body carefully like a rag-doll so that there would be enough room for them to both lay comfortably on the bed. Loki bit his lip to keep himself from screaming when Thor pulled him into his arms so that he was pressed against him, his head resting on the prince’s broad chest. The fingers that had molested him were now trailing soothing lines up and down his arms, attempting to make Loki feel secure.

How could he feel secure, though? In his foolish rage, he had given more ground than he ever intended and now he was more hopeless than ever before. The one thing Loki had in Asgard were his words. The one outlet he had for all of his anger and frustration was the mischief he was able to cause in these peoples’ lives. Now both were being denied to him. Odin had found a way to truly cage Loki, this time without hope of escape. If he were to speak his sharp words or cause any trouble with his seidr, then the Allfather or Thor could easily blame it on his ‘hysteria,’ and Loki would be forced to go through this humiliating, shameful experience all over again.

Eir had done him a service, though. Thor was bound by his oaths to keep Loki untouched until the night of their wedding, when they would be bound together eternally by the goddess of marriage herself. Thor’s own actions have shown that he was not willing to be patient, but thanks to Eir, he may not be willing to it. There in itself lied the problem, though. Loki was left with two options: he could continue to be himself and indulge in the mild resistance his limited freedom allows, but then he would be under the mercy of Thor and his “treatments.” Or he could lock it all away and be the
grateful little foundling princess they all wanted him to be. It would kill Loki, he knew. The loss of his freedom would eat him alive slowly from the inside out, leaving nothing but a hollow shell; a victim that Loki swore he would never be... but it would spare him from the shame of Thor’s touch, which made Loki want to die.

There had to be another way… He just didn’t know if he could find it.

“Are you alright, Loki?” Thor asked. He tilted Loki’s chin up so that he could look him in the eye. “Your breathing is shaky.”

“I am well, Thor,” he assured. “Do you not want to see your friends? Surely they will be missing you.”

“They will survive without me,” he laughed lightly. “Besides, they know that I wouldn’t be moved from your side. Not while you needed me.”

Loki said nothing more. He tilted his head down again and closed his eyes, willing Thor away with his mind. As the moments passed, though, the arms still held him, the fingers still caressed, and he could still hear the beating of Thor’s heart as his head lay against his chest. Loki listened to the soft rhythm of it for some time.

“Loki?”

“Yes, Thor?” Loki mumbled his words, feigning the oncoming of sleep. The unfortunate side effect, though, was that Thor pulled him closer.

“…What were you speaking of? Before, I mean. Those names… Loptr. What did it mean?”

“…It was nothing, Thor. Just the madness from my condition.”

“Are you certain? You seemed so angry before and it seemed very important to you.”

“I am certain, Thor. The name is of no importance, not anymore.”

Loki forced out a yawn. Thor pressed a kiss to his hairline and, thankfully, asked no more of him. He could feel the beat of Thor’s heart increase just the tiniest fraction. Loki turned his head and pressed a kiss to Thor’s chest, right above his heart, then rested his head against it, his ear right above it so that he could hear it in his sleep.

“Rest well, beloved,” Thor whispered. “All will be well soon enough.”

Loki closed his eyes and began to feel himself drift off to sleep. The soft beating of Thor’s heart played out beneath his ear like a gentle lullaby. Loki fell into a peaceful, deep sleep, with images of himself - in his Jotun skin - ripping that beating heart from Thor’s warm chest.

Chapter End Notes

And thanks for sticking around! For those who made it down here have a reward!

This is the picture that I base my version of Hermes off of.

http://i242.photobucket.com/albums/ff100/enda_photo/theo.jpg
In the next chapter, Loki realizes he needs to change up his tactic, and Thor's coronation draws near.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

When it rains, it pours, people. I'm sorry for taking forever. I've had nothing but constant reading and essays for the past month, I've been applying for internships, and, just to add the cherry on top of the stress, my laptop died. While she now rests in Valhalla, I've had to break out the pen and notebook paper in order to write out more for the story. I wasn't able to get everything that I wanted in this, but I'm going away for a couple of weeks, so I didn't want to leave you with nothing.

There is a lot of abuse of Marvel and Myth canon in this chapter. Forgive me for it, but I had to borrow from the canon to make this work. That being said I DO NOT OWN, NOR CLAIM TO OWN, ANY OF MARVEL'S COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL. THIS IS JUST A STORY I DO FOR FUN. PLEASE DON'T SUE!

Some Trigger Warnings: slight dub-con in this chapter, towards the end, but nothing too horribly descriptive. There is oral and attempted fingering.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was two more days before Loki was allowed the use of his limbs again, and another week before he was allowed to leave Eir’s care. Thor stayed true to his word and remained with Loki the entire time, much to the younger prince’s displeasure. He could not voice his thoughts about it, though.

Oh no. Eir’s words rang out in his mind every time he thought about screaming at Thor. If he begins having fits of madness or mischief, then he will require your assistance… Mischief or madness. Mischief… It was all Loki had, and now it was going to be used as an excuse for Thor to lay his hands on him again. It wasn’t fair. Anything Loki said or did now could be used for Thor to justify treatment for his “hysteria.” One word of disagreement, one push to get the oaf away from him, one single look that Thor did not like, and now he could hold Loki down, force himself on him - inside of him - all under the guise of curing him of his ailments. So in the end, Loki realized it was better to say and do nothing.

When he returned to his rooms, he could feel the tension thick in the air. Hulda was the only one there, ready to service him as always, but she would not say a word, nor look him in the eye. Loki played his part with her. He smiled, apologized profusely for his behavior, and begged her forgiveness. She gave it, of course, but she would not look Loki in the eye, nor would she stay too long in the room with him. Her eyes were watching him intently as she held herself tense. She was afraid of him, he realized. She loved Loki like her own child, but she was terrified of what he was, what she had seen him do. Loki tried not take it to heart. Hulda still served him dutifully, though now he did not have to listen to her nagging questions or idle gossip that she’d often tried to indulge him in. Loki told himself that he did not miss it, nor her hugs. He didn’t need her love, he swore that he didn’t.

On the night when he was returned to his rooms, though, Loki was granted a small reprieve from the hell that had been the past few weeks of his life. In the late hours of the night, when all of Asgard was asleep, there was a rapping on Loki’s window. The prince couldn’t even bring himself to smile when he opened the window and was immediately enveloped in Hermes’ warm embrace. The messenger held onto Loki tightly, saying nothing for a long time, but was rather content just to
feel his friend safe against him. Loki returned the embrace, allowing himself to take comfort in his friend one last time. For he knew that after this night, he was never going to be allowed to have this again. Loki forced a smile for Hermes when his friend drew back to kiss his cheek.

“What are you doing here, Hermes?”

“I received word that you had taken ill. I had to see that you were alright.”

“I am…well,” he sighed.

“You seem anything but.” Hermes took Loki by the hand and led him back to Loki’s bed. The two sat down on the edge and Hermes kept Loki’s hand firmly in his grasp. “Loki, what happened?”

“I…I snapped. After everything we saw, I just couldn’t take it and… I don’t know. Everything just seemed to pour out of me and…,” Loki took a deep breath, “it doesn’t matter anymore. They’ve won.”

“What do you mean?”

Loki turned away from his friend and attempted to take his hand away. Hermes wasn’t having it, though. He held onto Loki’s hand tightly. The prince may be too ashamed to look him in the eye, but Hermes will be damned if Loki thinks he will deny him this contact. After everything they’ve been through together, after everything they’ve seen, they were bonded for the rest of their eternal lives. Whatever had happened to Loki, Hermes wasn’t going to let him go through it alone. So he squeezed Loki’s hand gently as the prince told him all that had transpired in Eir’s healing chamber.

Loki told him about waking up powerless. He told him about Odin, the truths and the threats. He told him about Thor, and what he had done to “treat” him under Eir’s instructions. In the end, it was Loki who had to hold Hermes back from doing something stupid. As soon as he was done recounting his story, Hermes had shoved himself off the bed and marched towards the doors, intent on hunting down Thor and cutting off the bastard’s hands for touching his lovely Loki.

“If you even try to harm him, the wrath of all of Asgard will descend upon you,” Loki reasoned. “They will beat you. They will execute you. And when they’re done, they will bring war down upon Olympus. All of your family and friends will suffer and die. Is that what you want?”

“He put his hands on you, Loki!” Hermes seethed. “When you were at your weakest he forced himself on you.”

“…He is my betrothed, he has that right,” Loki laughed sadly.

“What? How can you even say that?”

“Because it is the truth. I am to be Thor’s queen one day, so he is within his right to touch me however he pleases.”

“So that is it then? After all of your tirades and claims that you would not be subservient to them, you’re just going to give up?”

“I am not giving up!” Loki hissed. “I am merely choosing my battles. I can no longer continue on the path I’ve taken, because Odin will be watching me now. His gaze is stronger than Heimdall’s, so any wrong move I make - one word he doesn’t like - and I will be even more at their mercy. I would avoid that, if I could.”

“…So what will you do?”
“All of Asgard wants me to be the grateful, dutiful consort. So that is what I will be.” Loki’s body shuddered, disgusted by the thought of what he must do. “I will not fight him.”

“You will willingly be his wife? How is that not giving up?” Hermes asked as he tried his best to calm himself.

“I said that I would play the part of his consort, I did not say that I would be his wife.”

“…What do you need me to do?”

Loki gave a small smile, glad that his friend had so quickly caught on. “You’ve been able to travel from Olympus to this realm without need of Heimdall or the Bifrost. That is a skill that I require for a messenger.”

Hermes’s playful smile, the one Loki loved so much, returned. “How I may be of assistance to you, my lovely lord Loki?”

***

Two days after he had been returned to his rooms, Hulda woke Loki with news that there was a visitor at his door. She helped Loki dress appropriately and stood with him as he opened the doors. It was there that Loki came face to face with a pair of glowing golden eyes and a small wet snout. Loki had to pause for a moment to realize the what was before him was a small pup. The creature was staring straight forward at Loki, its mouth open and panting, revealing its little pink tongue. The pup was being held up by its waist by a pair of rough, calloused hands, as its brown paws scratched at the air.

“Surprise,” a voice said from behind the pup.

Loki looked past the creature and saw Thor standing there, his arms stretched out holding his gift as he smiled a soft, nervous smile.

“Prince Thor,” Hulda greeted. She bowed as was custom and lightly nudged Loki to encourage him to do the same.

“Good day, Hulda,” Thor returned. “Good day, Loki. May I be allowed in?”

“I’m not sure if that is appropriate-”

“Of course,” Loki interrupted.

Hulda pulled a face, but said nothing when Loki stepped aside to allow the prince in. Thor’s tentative smile turned to an outright grin as he stepped through the threshold. He hadn’t been expecting Loki to allow him in, not without a fight anyway. Thor cradled the pup closer to his chest as he began to examine the room, no doubt curious to see how Loki lived. There wasn’t much in the room, Loki had to admit. Since his outburst, his collection of books had been taken away. His luxurious bed had been damaged and replaced with a smaller version, at least until his could be repaired. His desk had been replaced, thankfully, but otherwise the room remained bare. The drapes and tapestry that had once lined the walls had gone up in flames, and needless to say, the servants were hesitant to replace them.

“It’s…uh…nice. This room. Comfortable.”
“How may I help you, my prince?” Loki asked.

“Actually, it is not I who needs your help, but this little fellow here.” Thor grinned from ear to ear and raised the pup up again. The creature responded to the attention by giving a small bark.

“And who is your friend here?”

“Fandral and Hogun went on a hunt while I waited for you in Eir’s healing chamber. They found a direwolf bitch snared in a tramp with its leg broken. After they put the girl out of her misery, they found three of her pups. The poor things are too young to survive on their own, and I thought that… well, perhaps you would like one. To keep you company.”

Before Loki could say a word, Thor stepped forward and deposited the pup in his arms. The little thing began yapping fearfully and accidentally clawed at his arm, tearing the sleeve of his tunic. Loki bit his tongue to keep from snapping as he waited for the animal to calm down in his arms. All the while Thor was watching him expectantly, waiting to see how Loki would respond to his gift. When the pup finally stilled in Loki’s arms, it put its wet snout to Loki’s neck, giving a few experimental sniffs before its tongue began giving him tiny licks.

“He likes you already,” Thor said. “I know that most of the ladies at court prefer cats as companions, but…I don’t know, I thought that he might suit you well. Do you like him?”

Thor, Hulda, and the pup all seemed to stop and look at Loki, waiting for his answer. Hulda looked as if she was trying to smile, but it was too forced. Her lips were pulled too tightly, making them appear thin. No doubt she was thinking about all of the chaos that the little pup would bring, and the responsibility she would have to take for it - Loki surely wasn’t going to do it himself. Loki could almost see it in her eyes; the hope that he would throw the wolf pup back at Thor and demand that he leave. It’s what Loki would do normally, of course.

So one can only imagine Hulda’s surprise when Loki gingerly put the pup on the ground and practically threw himself into Thor’s arms. He wrapped his arms around the prince’s neck and pressed his lips to Thor’s. Thor gave a slight *hmph!* in surprise at Loki’s forwardness. He recovered quickly, though, and smiled into the kiss. He wrapped his arms around Loki’s waist and lifted the smaller prince, giving him a twirl as if Loki were some maiden falling into the arms of her dearest love. Play the part, Loki thought.

“He’s beautiful.” Loki grinned brightly up at Thor after he’d pulled back from the kiss. “Thank you so much, my prince.”

Thor stared back at Loki with so much affection in his eyes that Loki wanted to scratch them out. The prince’s smile was positively blinding, so pleased that his gift had this kind of reaction. Frankly he was pleased to get any kind of reaction from Loki. Typically his gifts for his intended would be met with mild disinterest or outright disdain. There was never any gratitude or gratefulness, nor any form of pleasing Loki. Thor always had to drag some kind of form of thanks from the younger prince, through kisses or pleasing touches, whether Loki cared for it or not. To have Loki actually show appreciation for once was strange, but Thor was content to let his happiness outweigh his confusion at Loki’s unusual behavior.

“Then I couldn’t be happier. And we’ve been over this so many times, Loki, you may call me Thor when we are together in private.”

Thor’s arms pulled Loki closer to him so that their chests were touching. He looked down at Loki - his lips particularly - as if he were planning to kiss him again, but a forced cough from the other side of the room put a stop to that.
“Not quite in private,” Hulda muttered.

“My lady will have to forgive me,” Thor laughed. “But my ardor cannot be contained when I see such a beautiful smile on my betrothed’s face.”

“Don’t tease her,” Loki said as he carefully pulled out of Thor’s embrace.

The little pup began to gnaw at Loki’s boot, demanding attention from its new master. Loki obliged the creature and picked it up. He ran his fingers through the soft fur as it tried to lick at his face.

“What shall we name him?” Thor asked. “How about Alfr or Bjorg?”

“Those are fine names, but I don’t believe they suit him.” Loki took a moment to examine the pup, those golden eyes staring back at him in an easy manner. “Fenrir.”

“A lovely name,” Thor agreed. The prince reached out to pet the fur on Fenrir’s scruff, but the pup turned and snapped his teeth at him. “Feisty fellow, isn’t he?”

“No doubt.” Loki gave Fenrir a good scratch behind the ear, to which the pup responded with the swift wagging of its tail.

“…How are you feeling, Loki?”

“You’ve asked me at least once a day since I woke in Eir’s healing rooms,” Loki sighed. “I am fine. My head is clear and I feel calmed. You need not worry.”

“Needn’t I?”

Thor’s expression changed to a serious one and Loki knew that it was time to set his plan in motion. He set Fenrir down on the floor, to which the pup whimpered, and looked over to his nurse.

“Hulda, may I speak to Prince Thor privately?”

“You are both required a chaperone, Loki.”

“It will only take a moment, Hulda. You may wait outside the door if you’d like to ensure that my virtue remains intact.”

“There is nothing virtuous about you, you little viper,” she huffed.

“Surely my lady is not disobeying a command from my intended,” Thor asked as he looked pointedly at Hulda.

She forced another smile and bowed low to the prince. “Of course not, your majesty. I will leave you two in peace and return when you are done.”

“Thank you, Hulda,” Loki smiled to his nurse. Just to annoy her, he took Thor’s hand in his own and led him to sit on the bed. Thor’s soft smile turned to a leer.

“Keep your feet on the floor and hands on the bed at all times,” Hulda instructed.

“Be gone with you already,” Thor called over his shoulder. Loki could hear Hulda muttering something under her breath, but couldn’t make out the words before the door slammed shut behind her. Thor rolled his eyes and looked back to Loki. “Is she always so pleasant?”
"You must forgive her, she has had the unfortunate luck of raising me since infancy. I believe that my former disposition has left quite a strain on her."

"Yes, you can be taxing at times... but, that is behind you now, isn’t it? We’ve had our moments of truce before, but we always seemed to end up back in the same place; you doing something just to spite me."

"Thor," Loki paused to take a deep breath. "You... you were right. What you said in Eir’s chambers, it was the truth. I’ve been so selfish and childish all of these years. I know that you did not personally put me in this situation... a-and I know that I need to stop seeing this as a punishment. It is a responsibility. It is a responsibility that I must bear for Jotunheim, for its future depends on what I must do here."

"You need not make it sound like such a terrible burden," Thor said.

"I’m sorry, but the weight of this burden weighs heavy on me. You’ll forgive me if it leaves me feeling dour."

"If it helps at all, I understand... The weight of the throne of Asgard weighs heavily on me as well. I try constantly to prove myself - to everyone - that I am worthy. I try to be the greatest warrior, I try to listen to my father’s council, and do my best to please them... but at times I fear that it will never be enough. I doubt that I will ever be deemed worthy of the throne."

"You were worthy enough to wield Mjolnir. Isn’t that proof enough?"

Thor laughed. "If that were the case, then I would have sat Hlidskjaf before you had your first bleeding. No, it is more than that I’m afraid... Father deemed himself worthy long before he was my age."

_Because he and his foul brothers ripped Ymir’s head from his shoulders, and he made himself a king._

"You should not compare yourself to your father so much," Loki reasoned. "Yggdrasil was still so young in his time, and there was much chaos. A ruler was needed then, regardless of how young he was. Besides, it wasn’t until the great Aseir-Vanir war that Odin truly proved himself ready for the throne. He could have annihilated Vanheim completely, but instead he showed them mercy and gave them a chance at redemption."

"So I must wait until another great war to prove my worth, then?"

"If need be," Loki shrugged. "Your day will come, in time. Until then, though, perhaps we should... start over again."

Thor gave him a curious look. Loki sighed and pressed on. "To say that we got off on the wrong foot would be a grievous understatement."

"Quite," Thor laughed.

"Be that as it may, I would like a chance to begin again. This time away from all of the show and fanfare... the way we should have been introduced in the beginning." Loki put forth his hand for Thor to take. "I am Loki, of Jotunheim."

Thor stared at the hand for a moment, almost as if he was afraid that it would turn into some kind of snake that would bite him. Loki considered it, but when trying to build trust he understood that it would be detrimental to his plans.
“I’m not going to hit you, Thor. It is alright.”

After another tense moment, Thor finally took Loki’s hand. Instead of the shake that Loki had wanted, Thor raised the hand to his lips and placed a kiss to his knuckles, much as he had on their first meeting. So much for starting over.

“A pleasure to meet you, Loki of Jotunheim. I am Thor, of Asgard.”

“Well met, Thor.” Loki smiled.

“I’ve not seen your smile very often,” Thor mused. “I like it. It makes you seem much lovelier… At the same time, though, it feels as if I’ve just fallen into some sort of trap.”

“I’m to be your consort one day, Thor. We’re going to have to learn to trust each other eventually.”

“I see,” he nodded. “If I had known that this whole time the key to your trust was abandoned wolf pups, I would have brought this little fellow to you long ago.”

Thor reached down to touch Fenrir again, but the little pup snapped his jaws at him again and stood defensively between Loki’s legs. It seemed that the animal had chosen where his loyalties lie, and it wasn’t with the prince.

“Little beast,” Thor laughed. “I rescue him from certain death and this is the thanks that I get for it?”

“Well, we foundlings stick together,” Loki said. He leaned down and offered his hand to Fenrir. He yipped happily and licked Loki’s palm. “He is wonderful, though. Thank you for him, Thor.”

“You’re most welcome.”

Thor began looking at Loki again with that sickening mixture of tenderness and affection, his eyes shifting to Loki’s lips. Loki knew what he wanted. He anticipated Thor’s movements and met the prince half-way. Their lips met in a soft kiss, that - for once - did not leave Loki’s lips bruised and swollen. When Thor pushed to deepen the kiss, though, Fenrir growled from his position on the floor.

*Good boy.*

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As much as Loki did not want to admit it, he had loved Thor’s gift of Fenrir. As loath as he was to enjoy anything that Thor would give him, he couldn’t resist the golden eyes of the little wolf, and soon enough the two were inseparable. Wherever Loki would go - sewing circles, training grounds, feasts, court festivities - Fenrir would follow closely on his heels, growling at anyone who got too close to Loki. Whether he picked up that possessive trait from Thor or he just picked up on Loki’s disdain of the Aesir, Loki did not know, nor did he really care. He was just thankful for his little companion and protector, particularly when he was in the presence of Odin. Loki wasn’t quite sure how it happened, but Fenrir seemed to have great contempt against Asgard’s king, growling and baring his teeth at him so often that it reached the point where Loki was no longer allowed to have him in the same room as the king. The annoyance Fenrir gave Hulda with his constant growling and tearing of the drapes and Loki’s gowns was also a bonus.

After giving Fenrir to him, things settled into a calm rhythm between Thor and Loki. Loki no
longer ignored Thor whenever they were in the same room together, nor did he snap at every little word that the prince would say. Thor would at times still say the most ignorant, insulting things regarding both Loki’s heritage and his biology, but unlike in their time before, Thor was not trying to get a rise out of Loki. He had no need to, not when the Jotun prince was finally learning his place in Thor’s life.

Loki played his part. He laughed at Thor and his friend’s jokes, listened with rapt attention as they told their tales, and engaged Thor in deep conversations. It wasn’t all perfect, of course. With Odin’s gaze constantly on him, Loki couldn’t do a complete turnaround on his behavior. The farce would have been seen through in an instant. So Loki let the change take place gradually. When Thor truly annoyed him, he let it show with either a snaky comment or by giving the prince the silent treatment. He still pushed back against Thor whenever the prince crowded him against a wall and attempted to molest him, but he didn’t put as much effort into the fight as he normally would, lest Thor believe he was suffering from his hysteria again. Thor didn’t seem to mind so much, though. As Loki suspected, Thor enjoyed the chase and exhibiting his dominance. He liked showing his power over Loki, having the smaller man beneath him, believing him to be vulnerable. The chase kept Thor’s interest, and Fenrir kept Thor from getting too handsy. Loki had trained the little wolf to attack the tendons at the ankles, should his master need the protection.

It was frustrating at times for Loki. Beforehand, when he felt overwhelmed by all of the eyes of Asgard upon him, he could conceal himself with his spells or transform himself into his animal forms to escape. Odin’s gaze was harder to evade, though. When he was not seated on Hlíðskjálf, watching Loki from his throne, then Odin’s spies would be all over the palace, watching and reporting on his every move. He was wrong when he thought himself to be in a cage before. This form of imprisonment was suffocating and, in times of desperation, Loki contemplated just setting all of Asgard on fire while he danced in the ashes. The answer to his dilemma was, unfortunately, not so simple. Though Loki’s power had grown, he knew that he couldn’t take on all of Asgard alone. To try would just be suicidal, and after so long of being imprisoned, Loki wanted so desperately to live.

If Loki wanted victory, then he would need a plan. Fortunately for Loki, he had an ally that was ready and willing to help him.

He couldn’t meet with Hermes in person, but he would know when his messenger had come. One afternoon, as he was searching his collections for something to read, he came across something new. It was an old tome, the leather binding it cracked with age and pages as brittle as dried leaves. The tome was written in a high-elfish language known from ancient Alfheim. Loki was, unfortunately, not as proficient in the language as he would like to have been - his tutors saw no reason for him to become fluent as most of the Nine spoke the common tongue of Asgard - but from what he could make out, the tome was entitled *Ymir’s Gift*.

It took Loki nearly a year to translate the tome, but once he had, he realized that his friend had brought him a most fortunate gift. The tome recounted the creation and destruction of the giant Ymir, but it included more of the tale than what Loki had found in Kvasir’s library. When Odin and his foul brothers destroyed Ymir and used his corpse to build Yggdrasil, Ymir’s soul survived and manifested itself into six gems. Like Ymir himself, the gems were separated and spread across the various realms of Yggdrasil, though five had been recovered and were residing in Asgard, because of course they were.

The Time gem in particular caught Loki’s interest. It was originally found on Alfheim, and was used by the light elves to give them the same immortality of the gods of Asgard. When Odin began his hegemony of the Nine, though, he took control of the Time gem and brought it to Asgard. With the help of the light elves, the Cave of Time was created. It served as a portal to the various realms,
allowing for travelers to access to different time eras. It served as a popular oddity for a time, until Odin found it to be a potential threat. For what was to stop an assassin from accessing the Cave and slaughtering Odin when he was a babe suckling at his mother’s teat? The Cave was ordered to be closed and then forgotten from the minds of the Aesir and the elves.

Well, that was one mystery solved for Loki, at least.

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The next gift from his messenger came in the form of scrolls of parchments found beneath his pillow. They were correspondence letters from the dwarves of Nidavellir to Odin.

To the Allfather,

It is with great pride and honor that we, your humble servants, take on the request to forge the weapons for the house of Odin. We give you our solemn oath that the mighty spear and war hammer you have requested will be completed within the year to your exact specifications. Your patronage is dear to us, and we do hope that trade between the Aesir and Nidavellir will only thrive in time.

Your servant,

Brokkr

The next one brought a smile to Loki’s lips.

To the most gracious Allfather,

We are glad that you have re-opened negotiations between Nidavellir and Asgard. Again, we sincerely apologize for the flaws in the hammer’s design -Do you remember that day, lovely Loki? - though we are happy that you were still able to accept our crafts as gifts into your house. In time we hope that Mjolnir will prove itself as useful as Gungnir. As for your latest request, this is by far the greatest challenge we have ever taken on, but have faith that we will prevail, and your gauntlet will prove to be the most potent weapon in all of Yggdrasil.

Your servant,

Brokkr

The gauntlet? Loki turned to the last scroll and read on.

Odin,

We apologize that the gauntlet did not meet up to your standards, but, as my brother and I have explained, the full power of the gauntlet will not be realized without the use of all six soul gems. We are aware that only five are within the possession of Asgard, but, as we both know, the final was lost in your war with Jotunheim. While at present the gauntlet remains a most formidable weapon, it will not grant you the power of Ymir that you so wish to possess. Perhaps it is for the best, though. So much power should not be wielded by one man alone, despite who they may be, Allfather. Seeing as we will not be able to reach a compromise, and you have neglected your payment of the gauntlet, I am requesting that all further negotiations between our realms be terminated.

Brokkr
So it was not enough that Odin had murdered his creator, he sought to control his soul as well? It was shocking how little this had actually surprised Loki. The knowledge of the gauntlet piqued his interest, though. He knew of the Infinity Gauntlet in passing. He knew that the powers of the weapon were limitless as it was. To hear that it was not at its full potential, though, was a shock. It was missing the final piece required to turn it into the most powerful weapon in all of Yggdrasil, a piece which was lost in Odin’s war with Loki’s kin.

Turning back to the tome, Loki searched through the names of the known gems. Those that had been recovered were known as the Power, Soul, Reality, Time, and Mind gems. The final one, the one which was lost to Odin, was called the Space gem.

Loki would need to learn more about this.

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The next of Hermes gifts came after a particularly trying day for Loki. Thor was in a particularly jovial mood that day. He, the Warriors Three - as they had taken to calling themselves - and the Lady Sif were leaving the next morning for the last of the seasonal hunt. It was a time honored tradition for the men of Asgard to partake in the two-week hunt before the solstice came. Tradition also dictated that the men would spend all day in the presence of their loved ones, so as to gather their favors and encourage them to return home sooner. Now that Loki was to play the part of the dutiful consort, he was forced into a full day of Thor’s company.

The prince had dragged Loki from the breakfast tables out to the training yard so that he could watch Thor paw at his fellow warriors for three non-stop hours. Afterwards Loki was forced to endure a picnic with Thor in the shady enclosure of Idunn’s gardens. Loki had to sit through Thor’s inane attempt at sonnets so terrible that it was a wonder that Bragi didn’t sprout out of the orchards and demand his head. All of this while Thor attempted to hand feed him fruits from the gardens. Of course the hand that was not trying to feed him spent its time attempting to run up Loki’s thigh. Fortunately for Loki, though, Fenrir - who was continuing to grow into a very formidable size - would growl the moment he saw his master’s discomfort, warning Thor to back off. Honestly, Loki must thank Thor for giving him the greatest weapon he’s ever had to guard his purity.

When the suns set in Asgard, a great feast took place for all of the men going on the hunt. Again, Loki was forced to smile and laugh at the appropriate times as Thor and his friends told and retold tales of their glory and adventures. Oh, Hogun managed to kill two stone trolls that had invaded his home village in Vanaheim? How quaint. Loki wondered how they would react to his tale about how he and Hermes had managed to outrun a particularly violent volcano that buried three cities in Midgard during their travels. Most likely they would mock his cowardice for not turning around and fighting the volcano himself. So instead, Loki smiled and feigned interest as he always did at these gatherings. He even allowed for Thor to lead him in a few awkward dances that had the oaf stepping on his toes. It was a great relief when the idiot just returned to his mead and left Loki be.

By the end of the festivities, though, Thor had insisted on escorting Loki back to his chambers, despite the fact that he was near stumbling drunk. Loki allowed it because it was expected of him. He allowed for Thor to take one of the gold bangles from around his arm as a favor during his hunt, so that Thor will have a piece of his beloved with him in his travels. When he was finished with his heart-felt declarations about Loki’s beauty and his sadness at being parted, Loki allowed for Thor to push him back against his door and practically devour his mouth, as was expected of him.

When it was finally done, Loki had a bath drawn for himself, desperate to scrub the feeling of Thor
off of him. As he was undressing, though, he felt a gust of wind and heard a heavy thud from behind him. He turned and saw a leather-bound journal lying on the ground next to his tub, that had not been there before. Loki laughed as he bent to pick it up when he felt another burst of wind. He turned again and this time found a single piece of parchment lying on the floor.

_Lovely Loki,_

_It pains me so that we can no longer take the time to enjoy each other’s company, for I do miss your beautiful smiles more than the rose misses the sun during the cold nights. For only the light of your smile can bring me from the darkness and fill me with the warmth of a new day._

_If that came off as overly sentimental, blame Apollo. He swears that a few honeyed words will make anyone swoon. I, however, know the key to my Loki’s heart. Therefore, you will find more information about the Space gem in the book behind you. Do be careful with it, though. It was stolen from Mimir’s personal vault and will most likely be missed soon enough. I will return for it in the morning. I have also brought a treat for Fenrir so that the blasted beast will not attempt to devour my leg again. Be well, lovely Loki and know that you are missed._

_Your friend,_

_Hermes_

_P.S.- Your ass looks particularly lovely this night._

Loki laughed aloud at the statement before he conjured a flame to burn the letter. Leave it to Hermes to brighten up any bad day. As Loki sat in his tub, he began to look through the journal that Hermes had brought him. It mostly consisted of drawings and tiny handwritten notes. From what Loki could gather, though, the notes pertained to a cube device used by Odin and powered at the heart by the Space gem. The gem had been manipulated from its original function of allowing wielders to teleport themselves across any region of space, regardless of distance or warding spells, into a device could create wormholes to different universes and dimensions, and, most importantly, create infinite energy. A most useful weapon against the Jotuns’ Casket of Ancient Winters.

Loki flipped through the pages of the journal, seeing how Odin and his advisers transformed the piece of Ymir’s soul into a mighty weapon that would prove to be the only true match against the Casket. Once the manipulation was finished, and the final design for the weapon complete, it was renamed. It was now known as the Tesseract.

A device that had been used against his kin. A device that would give the user unlimited energy and the power to enter any area in the universe, despite how heavily guarded it may be. A device that served as the missing piece to the greatest weapon in all of Yggdrasil. A device that was now lost to Asgard. A device that Captain Rogers was willing to sacrifice his life to obtain. A device that only Loki knew the location of…

Loki threw his head back and laughed. He laughed long and hard, for so long that Hulda eventually knocked on his door and asked if he was alright. He answered that he was fine, that he was just perfect. So many ideas were running through his head that it was hard to keep them all in order. He had a plan, now he needed allies.

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The next of Hermes’ gifts came nearly a decade later, much later than Loki would have liked. The time in between was some of the dullest years that Loki had ever known. His days passed in blurs of lessons, practicing his seidr, passing time with ladies of the court, and spending time in Thor’s
company. The only advantage to the latter was that the more time Loki spent with Thor, the more that the prince began to trust him. After a while, he actually began talking to Loki like he would any normal person, instead of just a conquest. The prince of Asgard had even taken to having Loki accompany him on his hunts with his friends. Of course such affairs were never particularly fun for Loki.

Whenever Thor and his band of friends went on a hunt it was typically on warm, sunny days. Do to his sensitivity to Asgard’s twin suns, Loki could not participate in their merriment, nor could he contribute directly with the hunt. Instead, if Thor wished for Loki to accompany him, Loki was forced to ride in a caravan and be carried by members of the Einherjar. Loki found it to be particularly humiliating to be carried around like a pampered invalid, especially when he could hear the jabs from Thor’s friends about the “princess.” It was especially harsh to hear coming from Sif. The lady Sif had for years at least attempted to be civil with Loki, if nothing else than for the sake of her friendship with Thor, but for her to see Loki acting the part of such a weakling apparently rubbed her the wrong way and she would confide to the Warrior’s Three over her disbelief that this was where Thor had chosen to lay his affections. Loki tried not to let it bother him. At least going on the hunts gave Fenrir a chance to run around in the open air. He was growing so large these days.

During the night on these hunting trips, Loki was allowed to leave the safety of his caravan to join the company of Thor and his friends as they sat around their campfire, regaling him with their tales of slaying the wild boars or bilgesnipe in the areas. Thor would always have one arm wrapped around Loki, the other wildly gesturing as he told his tales over the laughter of his friends at his exaggerations. Loki would laugh good-naturedly and congratulate Thor on his bravery - “Two bilgesinpes with nothing but your hammer!? My prince you are so brave. How ever did you manage to survive?”

Thor would smile, laugh, pull Loki close so that the younger prince could rest his head on his shoulder, and tell his story. When the tales were done and the warriors in need of rest, Loki would return to his caravan to rest while the others were allowed to take comfort under the stars. The first few times Loki had gone on these trips, Thor had tried to sneak into his shelter while the others were asleep, so that he could hold Loki even while the prince tried to find reprieve in his sleep. If Thor got even a foot too close to the caravan, though, Fenrir would stand immediately at attention and bare his teeth to the golden prince until he backed down, not willing to risk losing a limb to the beast or killing Loki’s favorite companion. The prince was having serious remorse about giving the infernal creature to him.

It was on a hunting trip like this that Loki was given his next gift. In the dark of the night, long after Thor and his company had gone to sleep, Loki felt lips being pressed against his brow. Being a light sleeper, Loki awoke instantly, his eyes catching the brief glimpse of hazel eyes and a bright smile before they disappeared completely, and he was left alone. Seriously, he needed to acquire shoes like Hermes’. When he looked around his caravan, he was pleased to see that his messenger had left him a gift. There was a box in the corner of the caravan, nestled between his plush pillows. There was a note on top of the box.

Lovely Loki,

It has been far too long since I have seen your lovely face, and I was not disappointed, for you look so peaceful in your sleep. I know that ten years is nothing but the blink of an eye for the likes of us, but every minute without your company stretches for what feels like an eternity. How I have missed you, my Loki. Fret not, though, for I have been busy in my absence. Inside this box you will find a few secrets from the various realms. Do be careful with them, for they were most difficult to obtain. I even had to rely on that damnable Cave of yours to collect a few. When you return to your rooms,
you will also find that a portrait of yourself has gone missing, for which I take blame. I have need of it, and no not for that, you dirty boy! You will see why soon enough. Be well until we meet again, Lovely Loki. And hopefully you will be pleased with what I’ve brought you. Keep it secret and safe.

Hermes

Loki quickly opened the box and found stacks of letters and bound leather journals inside. He dug down until he found the largest journal and opened it, flipping through the pages. The runes inside were tiny, as if they had been written down by a fruit-fly. Loki squinted at the words and was about to close the book, when a certain name stood out to him. Alflyse.

Loki read on and soon discovered that this was the personal journal of Alflyse, Queen of Svartalfheim. Not only that, but it was the personal journal she kept during the great civil war of Svartalfheim.

Malekith’s forces grow stronger by the day. Through bribery and his seidr, he ensnares new allies almost daily. Our army has held him back to the outer deserts of the realm, but he is drawing closer everyday. Our request for allies has gone unanswered.

Now that was a different story from what Kvasir had taught him. According to the old scholar, as soon as Malekith made the attempt on Alflyse’s life, Asgard was there to answer their cries for help. He should really stop letting himself be surprised by these facts. He read on.

Malekith’s numbers continue to grow. Try as though we might, our armies cannot hold him back. We’ve heard reports of at least five of the outer villages being razed to the ground, all inhabitants have either joined with Malekith’s forces or have been killed. None of the other realms have answered our call for help. Freyr of Alfheim is too concerned with the search of his lost love to lend an ear to our cries and Odin’s eyes are ever on Midgard. In our desperation we have even called upon the giants of Jotunheim, but their newly crowned king is young and restless. It is doubtful that they will be able to lend us aid. The dwarves remain our allies, if only for monetary reasons, but in times such as these I will take what I can. There is hope, though. Jagrfelm may have developed a way to weaponize the gift of Ymir, the Soul gem. If he succeeds, this could turn the war in our favor.

Loki’s eyes widened at the new revelation. So one of the Infinity gems had come from Svartalfheim? Loki flipped and scanned the pages of the journal, searching for how it came under Asgard’s possession. Sure enough, the answer was scrawled out there in the runes.

Jagrfelm’s work with the Soul gem has been most fruitful. The gem itself held great capabilities of attacking an enemy, even at the level of his very soul, but our dear Jagrfelm has managed to reduce the gem into a liquidized state. The sentient Soul gem can now act as a parasite, consuming an enemy host from within and reducing them down to their natural state. It is a most fearsome and effective weapon. And thus, upon hearing of its creation, Malekith covets it greatly. The citadel has fallen in his attempts to steal the Aether - as it is now called - and the capital lays in ruins. All is not lost, however. Odin has finally sent word. Asgard’s forces will be arriving through the Bifrost within the week. This war may be won yet.

Oh, poor naïve Alflyse, Loki sighed. He flipped to the final pages and was, again, unsurprised by what he found.

It has ended, finally. The war is done and Malekith is dead. Lives have been lost on all sides, cities have been burned, and our realm will never be the same again. One must wonder how it has come
to this. So much senseless death and destruction, and for what? Svartalfheim has been torn asunder, our people irrevocably changed, because one man’s desire for power knows no bounds. I curse Malekith to the deepest levels of Hel.

One ray of hope remains, though. Asgard has agreed to help us rebuild our world, and will provide the necessary aid that we need. In return they ask simply for our loyalty and the Aether. Our loyalty we will gladly give, for without Asgard - even with the Aether - it is doubtful that our world would have survived this war. And although I am hesitant to hand over our great weapon, I have been given Odin’s assurance that it will be locked away in Asgard’s vault, safe from those who would disabuse its power. What other choice do I have?

Loki bit his lip and quietly put the book back into the box. If he and Hermes had not traveled to Svartalfheim, if he had not told Malekith to - No! He was not going to let himself be overcome with guilt. It was in the past now. His future lay elsewhere.

Over the course of the hunting trip with Thor and his friends, Loki had gone through the items in the box twice; through the various letters, journals, and designs. From his readings of the materials, he was able to map out a kind of timeline for Asgard’s relations with the other realms. The great Aseir-Vanir war, the end of which Loki and Hermes were witnessed to, began when the rulers of Vanaheim first obtained the Power gem. The gem was said to give the wielder enhanced strength and durability, as well as the power to manipulate energy. The Vanir were already impressive seidr users, but with the gem, they could surpass the strength of Asgard. Of course Odin would not permit that.

The Reality gem was, shockingly, originally located on the home-world of the dwarves. Of all of the gems that Loki read about, this one seemed to be the most powerful of the lot as it was able to alter reality itself to the user’s will. But either the dwarves didn’t know the purpose of the gem or their version of reality was just very bland, for they apparently just horded the gem away with all of their other treasures. The dwarves did so love their shiny gems and gold. The Reality gem was lost to them, though, after a drinking contest with the lady Saga. The woman was known to be a close companion of Odin - too close, some would say - who was born with mead running through her veins. After a delegation between the worlds, the ruler of the dwarves, Ivaldi, wagered that he could drink Saga under the table, betting half of his riches including the gem. It was a glorious victory for Saga and Asgard.

The last gem, the Mind gem, was first found on Muspelheim of all places. It was the prized weapon of the fire giant, Surtr. The giant is known throughout Yggdrasil for his size, strength, and great sword. With the power of the Mind gem, though, he was given great psionic powers and, from the reports Loki read, was working on a way to use the gem to link his mind with every giant on his realm. The overall goal was, apparently, to attack the other realms, specifically Asgard, as one single-minded unit. Asgard was able to intervene and take possession of the gem before Surtr could accomplish his task. The giant had since pronounced the Aesir as his enemy and sworn his vengeance.

So Loki came to know how Asgard came into possession of the soul gems, how Odin had commissioned a weapon to wield each gem as one cohesive unit, how he had foolishly lost one, and how Asgard maintained strained relations with the other beings of Yggdrasil. He could kiss Hermes for these gifts, he really could.

On the last night of the hunt, as Thor and the others slept, Loki began to write out a letter for a potential ally. Alfheim was out of the question. Freyr owed his power to Odin and there was a
chance that he could still, even after all of this time, recognize Loki as the mysterious woman who had broken his heart. Svartalfheim, as well, was not an option. Though Alflyse may be bitter over the lose of her people’s greatest weapon, she remained on good terms with Asgard and was unlikely to turn against them. The dwarves of Nidavellir were neutral people, unless there was a fortune to be gained, and, at the moment, Loki had no gold or riches to give. Vanafheim could be tempting, but seeing as how tightly Asgard held the reigns on the Vanir, it was unlikely that they would be willing to help.

Instead, Loki penned two messages. One to little Hel, ruler of the dead, and the other to Surtr of Muspelheim. When he was done with them, he left them sitting next to his pillow in the caravan. They were gone by the next morning. Loki smiled and began to plan his next move.

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Though Loki was already thankful for the knowledge that had been gifted to him through Hermes’s gifts, the next one he received made him want to throw himself into Hermes’s arms and swear his loyalty to the messenger for the rest of his unnaturally long life.

It was waiting for him in his room after they had returned from the hunt. Thor and his friends had managed to bring back five stags, three wild boars, and one bear from their hunt, so there was a welcoming feast for their family and close friends. It was a relatively small affair, so Loki could not slip away from it. He’d sat at the table, leaning contentedly against Thor as his intended told his parents of their journey. Frigga smiled good-naturedly, as she always did, but Odin seemed unimpressed. He kept sending glares in Loki’s direction, but the young prince just ignored him and saved the meat of his dinner for Fenrir. He had been taken to the kennels upon their return, and Hulda deemed him too large to remain in Loki’s room at night.

After the feast was done and he was sure that Fenrir was provided for for the evening, Loki retired to his own rooms for the night, ready to have a soft bed again after sleeping so long in the caravan. The letter was waiting for him beneath his pillow.

The parchment was large, unlike all of the other letters that Hermes would bring him. The runes on the page were quite large as well, much larger than Odin’s scratchy writing or Kavisr’s elegant calligraphy. For a moment, Loki thought that Hermes was playing some kind of joke on him, until he read the name at the top.

To my Loptr

Loki could feel his heart freeze mid-beat and hear the hiss of air as he gasped. It couldn’t be… It couldn’t. His fingers were trembling as he held the letter in his hands. Loki sat there for a long time, just staring down at the parchment, reading the name Loptr over and over again. He didn’t know how long he had been holding the letter before he finally forced himself to move past the first line and read the first words that his mother would ever speak to him.

Even as I write this letter now, I fear that this is nothing more than a cruel joke perpetrated by Odin. I would not be surprised. I was forced to watch as that man took my kingdom, my mate, and my children from me. It would seem fitting that he would attempt to take the last shred of my sanity as well. However, this annoying creature with winged feet, who has been invading my halls almost daily for months, insists that this is no ruse to robe me of the last little bit of life in me, so I am choosing to put my faith in him.

If this is you, Loptr, if by some miracle you have found a way to contact me despite the gaze of Odin and his gatekeeper, then I have one thing above all else to say to you. I love you, my child. I have loved you from the first moment I felt you kick from within my womb and I have loved you
everyday since you have been gone. The years since you were stolen from me have not been kind. Not for myself, nor for my kingdom. It has been hard to continue on after the destruction of our last war. Without the Casket, our realm has fallen into a never-ending cycle of famine and civil wars. We do our best to drive ourselves forward, but with each passing year it becomes harder to pull ourselves up. This slow genocide is cruel, even by Odin’s standards.

My one ray of hope in all of these years has been that you were alive and well out there somewhere. This winged pest has told me that you remain a ward in the house of Odin, that you have been given lessons in various subjects including seidr, and that you are betrothed to the prince of Asgard. For the latter, I am sorry, my child. This wasn’t the life I wanted for you. I had imagined a throne for all of my sons, and perhaps it was this selfish desire that lead to all of them being taken from me. You were never meant to become a pawn in this game for power, my child.

I do hope that you are well, though. Your friend tells me that while you are not being treated with outright cruelty, you are not being given freedom either. Do the Aesir hurt you, Loptr? If they do, then send word, and I will raze Asgard to the ground in your name. I do not care how impossible it may seem, I would do it for you, or finally die trying. I know that it must be lonely there, but please remember that no matter where you are, you are always in the thoughts and hearts of myself and the people.

Your friend has given me a great gift as well. On his last visit, he gave me a portrait of you. I will admit that I cried at the sight of seeing your face for the first time. Even with your true form hidden by Odin’s disguise, I can see how much you resemble your grandmother, my dear mother. He was small for our kind as well. You have grown into such a beautiful young man, Loptr, and I am proud to call you my son.

I know it may be hard, but if it could be at all possible, please write to me. Let me know for certain that I have not finally succumbed to the madness that his been plaguing me all of these years, and that you are indeed alive, Loptr. I love you, my child. I hope beyond hope that these words reach you.

Your mother,
Laufey

When he was done reading, Loki read over the letter again. Then again. And then once more. On the last reading, he felt something wet against his cheek and realized that for the first time since that day so many years ago in the cave, he was crying.

Sentiment.

Loki furiously wiped his tears away. He folded the letter four times and then hid it in one of his older tomes, one that Hulda would never think to look in, one that he wouldn’t look in again. Loki had imagined for years what it would be like speak with Laufey. He had imagined the unconditional love and acceptance that he would finally receive, the affection, and the sense of belonging somewhere. Now he had it… or the closest thing he would ever come to it. And he was angry.

He was angry with himself for being overcome with the sentiment. Angry for the sense of love he held for a mother he never knew. Angry that all he wanted to do was write out twenty letters to Laufey, to tell him about his life and beg for him to rescue him and take him back to Jotunheim. The sentiment would do him no good right now. If he wanted what he had in mind to work, then he would need to put that sentiment on the back-burner and focus on his goal. There would be time for him to reunite with his mother later. After he watched as Asgard burned.
But first, he needed to put the next part of his plan into action. He needs Thor to take him to the weapons vault.

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For the next few months, Loki began a secret correspondence with his two potential allies. Little Hel was happy to hear from Loki, as it had been so long since her guest had visited her kingdom. She was glad to know that Loki was doing well and agreed to help him on his future endeavors. Life among the dead does get so boring, after all. It would be nice to spice things up once in a while.

Surtr was a bit harder to convince. It took some time before the fire giant responded to his message, and even then he thought it to be some sort of scheme orchestrated by Odin. Loki assured him that it was no trick, and that his hatred for the Aesir was rivaled only by Surtr’s. The giant was not completely convinced, but he was willing to listen to what he had to say.

In the meantime, Loki swallowed down his pride and began to take down the walls he’d built between himself and Thor. In the time since Eir’s healing chamber Loki had calmed his attitude with the other prince and even allowed for small intimate touches instigated by Thor. Now, though, he actively sought out Thor’s company. He would smile charmingly at Thor whenever they were in the same room together and feign searching for him when they were not. Whenever they were close, Loki would make sure that the two were always in some form of contact, through holding hands, a caress, or leaning into the prince as they walked or sat together. As much as he hated it, Loki realized that the best way to have Thor in his control was through the intimacy. He could keep his interest by keeping up the chase, but if it was not rewarded every so often, then eventually Thor could give up. Loki couldn’t let that happen.

So Loki became the smitten lover that everyone had expected to be from the beginning.

Hulda was suspicious, of course, but as long as Loki was behaving then she had no reason to complain. Frigga smiled pleasantly as she always did, but occasionally she would cast wary glances in his direction, no doubt curious as to the change in Loki’s demeanor. Odin, oddly enough, looked smug whenever he saw Loki draped over Thor’s arm. Loki wasn’t sure whether it was just the old man calling his bluff or if he had bought the act as well, but he did not question it. To test Odin would be detrimental to his plans. At the moment, he needed all of his focus on Thor.

Thor, of course, did not question Loki’s new showing of affection. To him, it had been a long, slow build to this moment; the moment when he crowed Loki against a wall and the younger man didn’t try to push him away.

The first time it had happened was after Thor had run into Loki as he was walking with Sigyn. Though Loki wasn’t fond of many people in Asgard, it could be said that he tolerated Sigyn the most. She was a quiet girl, interested in spells, and always had a pleasant attitude about her. She was also extremely beautiful with her pale cheeks, auburn hair, and warm brown eyes. She knew she was lovely, Loki knew it, but most importantly, Thor knew it as well. After Loki’s dance with the girl and his comments about rutting her on the tables, Thor had not liked it when Loki was alone in her company.

So when the prince of Asgard happened upon the two as they strolled through the halls after the ladies’ sewing circle, Thor had growled, pushed Loki against the wall and fixed him with a cold stare. Sigyn had stood behind the two princes, unsure of what she should do, but Loki just gave them both a warm smile.

“Be calm, beloved,” Loki had said. “I am yours.”
Then Loki had leaned forward and pressed his lips to Thor’s. For good measure, he made sure to part his lips and allow Thor to properly ravage his mouth. Beast.

From then onwards, Loki gave his affections freely. When taking meals together, he would lean against Thor’s shoulder and allow for the prince to hand-feed him fruits from his plate. If Thor had done particularly well in the training yards, Loki was the first to congratulate him by running into his arms and rewarding him with a kiss - oh, how Sif grew to hate having Loki in the training yard. When the two took evening strolls together around the courtyards or in the gardens, they would always find a place to stop and kiss until their chaperone was forced to intervene. Eventually, it was Loki who suggested ways for the two of them to meet in secret so that they could know each other more intimately without interruption. Oh yes, Thor was quite happy with this new arrangement.

Loki allowed for this show of affection to grow slowly, each time giving Thor just a bit more before pulling away. Every time, Loki could feel Thor’s desire for more from Loki. When they embraced, Thor’s hand would cup Loki’s pectoral over his gown, or would run over his inner thigh. Quite a few of Loki’s gowns and tunics had received tears due to Thor’s excitement, and as a consequence, Loki would receive a scolding from Hulda about acting like a common trollop - though Loki couldn’t understand what she was so upset about. She had wanted for years for Loki to get along with the prince, now that he was, she had nothing but complaints.

When she chaperoned for the princes, she was very vocal in her disapproval of their heated embraces and had even threatened to get Odin himself involved if they did not behave as gentlemen of the court should. Their other chaperones, too, had grown weary of having to separate the princes every time they got too close together. Honestly, they were behaving like wild hares in heat. Each time they were forced to separate for the sake of maintaining Loki’s purity, however, Thor would grow angrier and angrier, until he broke one of the Einherjar’s nose out of frustration. Loki knew then that it was time to move to the next step.

“I grow weary of all of these eyes upon us,” Loki complained one afternoon as they relaxed in the shade of Idunn’s gardens. Thor had his arm around Loki’s shoulder, while the younger male leaned against him, his head resting on Thor’s chest.

“You and me both, beloved,” Thor laughed lightly.

Loki glanced from side to side, making sure that the guards chaperoning them could not hear, before he turned his eyes up towards Thor. He smiled warmly at his betrothed and whispered, “I wish that there was a place where we could be alone. Even for one night. I just want to be able to be close to you without all of these people watching us.”

Thor’s eyes widened at the prospect. He had not been truly alone with Loki - at least with his doppelganger - since that night in the courtyard, before Loki’s adventures across the nine. Though there was the risk that Loki’s “hysteria” could easily be triggered again, Loki could see it in his eyes Thor was more than willing to take the risk. Their first time “together” Loki was a most unwilling participant, silent and unsure of what to do. No doubt Thor’s mind was reeling with the possibilities of what he could do with a willing Loki, one who wanted to learn how to please his betrothed.

Loki knew he had him when Thor lifted him so that he could whisper into his ear. “Tonight, after everyone has gone to rest, you and I will sneak away again. We will go into the courtyard, just like we did that night.”

“Thor,” Loki said coyly. He’d even managed to produce a blush on his pale cheeks. “I would love nothing more… but what of Heimdall or your father? They watch me constantly to ensure that
something such as this does not occur. How do you think they found out about us last time?"

“We will wait until Father rests. He’s doing more of that as of late. Mother fears that the Odinsleep will be upon him soon… As for Heimdall…well, the gatekeeper is in service to the crown and the royal family. He will look away, so long as I do not break my oath to keep you pure…well, as long as I don’t completely break it.” He finished off that charming sentence with a waggle of his eyebrows.

Loki laughed lightly and playfully hit his chest. “Behave, you. And it’s not just Heimdall… Anyone could happen upon us in the courtyard. Why do you think I was so quite before? I was afraid that we would be caught if I became too vocal… No, it is a silly idea… Unless there was a place where absolutely no one would find us.”

It takes a few minutes for Thor to concentrate as to think of a solution. During that time, Loki could practically see the gears grinding in his head. After a long moment of silence, Loki was about to give him another big push in the right direction, but finally the light went off in his head and Thor turned to him with a wide grin.

“What?” Loki asked, his voice filled with mirth.

“I know of the one place in Asgard where only those of royal blood are allowed to go. It would be perfect.”

“Where?”

“The weapons vault,” Thor whispered so quietly that Loki actually has to strain to hear him.

“Thor, no!” Loki chided. “Your father would be furious if he found out! And what of the guards?”

“My father need not know. And the Einherjar are in my command as much as they are his. I have been to the vault many times and it is never a problem to have them vanish at my order… If you truly want to be with me, Loki, then just say the word.”

“I… I do, Thor,” Loki forced the words out. Even after all this time, it still made him sick.

Thor grinned in return. “Tonight, then. While Asgard rests, I will take you there.”

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For all of the rumors of Asgard’s vault being the most impenetrable place in Yggdrasil, Loki was surprised at how easy it actually was to enter. True to his word, Thor came to Loki’s room late in the night and had the younger prince to wear a large, dark cloak so that he could blend into the shadows. He took Loki deep into the heart of the palace, until they came to a narrow staircase behind a double door. The vault itself was a grand, trapezoidal room suspended in the center of what appeared to be a great abyss, accessible only by the narrow stairs. Thor had Loki wait in the shadows as he got rid of the guards standing at the main entrance. Loki was slightly amused at how easy it was to make two battle-hardened Einherjar act like trained dogs. They humbly bowed to Thor and left their posts at his command, slinking away like a pair of kicked pups.

Once they were gone, Thor called Loki over to stand at his side. When Thor pulled a dagger out from the sleeve of his tunic, Loki almost called upon his ice to attack the prince. Thor saw the way he tensed up, though, and was quick to calm him.

“Only those of royal blood are allowed into the vault. Relax, I will not harm you. This is just to ensure that the Destroyer will not hurt you.”
Thor took his hand then and cut along his palm, the blood drawing up quickly. He turned the dagger to his own hand then and made an identically cut along his palm. When the blood began to spill, he took Loki’s injured hand in his own and allowed for their blood to mingle. When he deemed it enough, he took Loki’s hand and placed it onto the cold metal door. Loki watched, fascinated, as his blood was absorbed into the door. The interlocking triangular lines that Loki had seen on Mjolnir appeared on the door, glowing brightly gold with the signature of Odin’s magic before the door, finally, opened, allowing for the two princes to enter.

Thor smiled brightly and wrapped his arm around Loki’s shoulder, drawing him close to him as he led them inside. The weapons vault, for all of the hype surrounding it, was disappointing for Loki. The room was cold, gray and narrow. It consisted of a single walkway with nooks built into the side of the walls to hold the legendary weapons of Asgard. Thor was saying something to him - something about visiting this room as a boy and wishing to wield Mjolnir - but Loki paid him no mind. His eyes were scanning the weapons, taking note of what was there and where they were placed. In one of the nooks, a bright yellow light was glowing, making it stand out over the others. Loki broke free from Thor’s grasp and took a closer look… The Eternal Flame. A mystical flame stolen from Muspelheim by Odin and his miserable brothers. Loki made sure to tuck that information away in the back of his mind.

Next to the flame, though, was the object Loki had desired. The Infinity Gauntlet. The gauntlet, suspended upright beneath a soft white light, was a most formidable weapon, so I’ve been told. Quite powerful.

“More so than Mjolnir?”

Loki had lost himself to his musings. Thor had come up behind him as he stared at the gauntlet, putting his large arms around his waist. Loki took deep, calming breaths when he felt the prince’s lips against the back of his neck and heard him whispering in his ear. He vowed on the spirit of Ymir, that he would see Asgard burn for this.

“You are drawn to this one?”

“No,” Loki shook his head and turned away from the gauntlet. “I was just admiring the craftsmanship of the piece. It is very lovely. Though, I don’t see why your father deems it fit to keep a jeweled glove among his most dangerous treasures.” He made sure to give a playful laugh to sell his ignorance.

“Ah, but that is no ordinary jeweled glove. That is the Infinity Gauntlet. It is a most formidable weapon, so I’ve been told. Quite powerful.”
“Nay!” He scoffed. “I doubt that anything can match Mjolnir in battle, save, perhaps, for Gungnir.”

Fool.

“Come,” Thor said, gently pulling Loki along with him. “I want to show you something.”

Loki leaned into Thor’s hold and allowed himself to be led away. Thor didn’t say a word, but merely held a wide grin as he walked them down the corridor of the vault. There was a bright light at the end of the corridor, blocked off by some sort of gate. Before the gate, though, stood a rectangular box with a swirling blue light emanating from it. Again, Loki felt something inside of him pull him towards the box, like a siren’s song calling to him, drawing him in… Loki realized then what it was.


“Yes,” Thor confirmed.

He walked Loki closer to the relic, until they could feel the chill air that surrounded the Casket. For a long time, the two princes said nothing at all. Loki just stared forward, taking in the sight of his people’s greatest power and treasure. The Fimbulwinter of Ymir, the seidr that connected the Jotnar to their world, standing there just before him. All Loki had to do is reach out and he would hold the power of a thousand winters in his hands. Before he even realized what he was doing, his hand had actually raised and moved forward, wanting to touch, to hold.

“Don’t!” Thor shouted and grabbed his hand. “If you so much as touch it, the Destroyer will be called forward.”

“Then why even show it to me?” Loki snapped. “Why let me see the power of my people if I could not so much as touch it?”

“I did not show it to you to taunt you,” Thor answered. Liar. “I merely thought that you would like to see it. It is amazing to behold… Such a small and unassuming thing, yet it contains so much power, to both create and destroy. It really is a testament to my father that he was able to capture it.”

Loki was glad that his back was towards Thor, for if the prince could see the rage on Loki’s face, then it would destroy his years of planning and compromise. In all of their years together, Loki had known to be a brute, selfish, greedy, hot-tempered, and ignorant. This, however, was the first time Loki had ever see him be downright cruel. To put Loki this close to the Casket, knowing that he could never even touch it was the worst thing he had ever done to Loki. And the worst part was, Thor didn’t even know how cruel he was being. He expected Loki to be grateful for this.

So the prince of Jotunheim took a deep breath and said, “The greatest treasure of Jotunheim.”

“Second greatest,” Thor whispered in his ear.

I am nothing more than another stolen relic, locked up here until I can fulfill my purpose.

Those hands moved from his shoulder down to grip his waist. The fingers tightened possessively, bunching the fabric of his cloak and gown, no doubt leaving bruises along his flesh. Thor kissed the top of his head gently, his lips moving slowly downwards to the side of his neck. Loki closed his eyes, exposed his neck and leaned back into the embrace. Thor’s kisses were sloppy, leaving a wet trail along his skin that was chilled by the air around the Casket. The hand on his waist moved slowly around, until the palm of his hand rested against his lower stomach. Loki was pressed back against Thor, and he could feel the other prince’s arousal beginning to grow.
After taking a breath to steady himself, Loki turned in Thor’s arms and wrapped his arms around his neck. Their lips met then in what could be seen as a sweet, gentle kiss. Almost loving. Loki didn’t want loving, though. He didn’t want these gentle touches or the tender look in Thor’s eyes as he looked down at him. He didn’t want a loving Thor. He wanted the brash, greedy Thor that he had always known. The Thor who took what he thought was his, without fear of consequence. He needed that, to be reminded of Thor’s true nature. He needed it, because if he was going to break the vow that he had made to himself - that he would never go willingly to Thor’s bed - then he at least wanted to make it as painful as possible.

So Loki pushed himself harder against Thor. Hard enough to bruise his lips. Thor was taken aback at first, the way he always is at Loki’s forwardness, but he recovered quickly enough. He tangled his fingers in Loki’s black hair, gripping tight enough to make his scalp sting. When they broke apart for air, he used his hold to crane Loki’s neck to the side so that he could kiss and bite along the pale flesh. He pressed himself into Loki, allowing the smaller prince to feel his need for him.

“Thor,” he panted his name. “Need you. Want to feel you.”

Thor didn’t need to be told twice. He pulled back instantly and tore at the clasp of Loki’s cloak. The metal clasp broke away, clinking against the ground, as the cloak fell from his shoulders. The hands moved to the strings at the collar of his sleeping gown, pulling them loose enough to expose the skin of his collarbone. Loki moved to take the gown off himself, but Thor’s impatience got the better of him. He grabbed the spuncloth fabric from below his waist, and in one swift moment, he had pulled it over Loki’s head and tossed it to the ground.

Loki bowed his head and bit his lip self-consciously, his hands moving to cover his exposed sexes. Thor grinned down at him and took Loki’s hands in his own, pulling them away.

“No need to be shy now,” Thor smiled.

“It is hard not to be, when I am the only one exposed.”

“Let’s remedy that, shall we?”

Thor’s large fingers quickly began to undo the laces of his breeches. Once loosened, Thor pulled them down and allowed for the “hammer of Asgard” to stand in all of its glory. Loki actually had to take a moment to marvel at the sheer size and girth of it, silently thankful that he would not be forced to take such a thing tonight - or any night, if he could help it. Thor grinned when he caught him staring, as he pulled his red tunic over his head. Once the clothes were in a pile on the floor, he grabbed Loki again by the back of his head and pulled him in for another heated kiss. Loki moaned into it, opening his mouth for Thor to ravage him. Knowing that he would have to participate a little more, Loki ran his fingers along Thor’s muscled chest, his nails raking over the skin just hard enough to make Thor hiss.

The hand that wasn’t holding Loki in place moved over Loki’s body, until those calloused fingers reached his groin. They bypassed his flaccid cock, thankfully, and instead moved to the small nub of Loki’s female sex. Without meaning too, Loki whimpered at the sensation of it, leaning into Thor. He braced his hands on Thor’s shoulders as the prince gently teased his clitoris, his fingers moving over it in a circular motion. Memories of Eir’s chamber began to run through Loki’s mind. Memories of being unable to move, unable to stop Thor as he took his pleasure in Loki’s weakened state, unable to do anything except wait for it to be over… Loki knew that he needed to go through with this, but he didn’t want to feel that way again.

“What’s wrong? I thought this was what you wanted?”

“I- it is. I do!” Loki nodded vehemently. “It’s just that… I am afraid. After what happened last time you and I were… intimate, I lost control of myself to madness.”

“That was so long ago, Loki. Surely that won’t happen again.”

“But what if it does?” Loki asked, wide-eyed and fearful. “I want to be closer to you, Thor, but… if I lose control again, then this is the worst place it could happen. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You couldn’t hurt me,” Thor assured. “I understand your fear, but I would not let you lose yourself again.”

“You are capable of many things, Thunderer, but that is not one of them.”

“…So what are we to do, then?” Thor's eyes were narrowing in obvious frustration, from both Loki’s changing mood and his almost painful need.

Loki knew that now, more than ever, he had to tread carefully. He was in a precarious situation. He needed Thor to be in enough desperation to lose himself to the moment, but restrained enough to not simply take what he wanted. Loki had come too far for that. So, with his head tilted downward, eyes looking up demurely at Thor through thick lashes, Loki gave the prince a shy smile. His hand trailed down from Thor’s shoulder, over his pectoral and down to the muscles of his abdomen, nails lightly raking over his skin.

"Like you told me once before, we have a duty - not just to our realms - but to Yggdrasil. I... I am afraid that if I give myself over to you before we are wed, then your father will learn. I will have broken our betrothal, and be deemed unworthy of you... When we do fully consummate our relationship, I want it to be in our marriage bed. I want it to be me as your wife, and you as my lord husband."

Thor did not answer for a long time. He stared down at Loki, nostrils flared, jaw set, and member painfully hard against his thigh. Loki could see it in his eyes; he wanted nothing more than to pin Loki against the wall and take what he wanted from his Jotun whore. Even so, even one with as thick a skull as Thor could see that Loki had a point. If Odin were to discover that Thor had dishonored Loki, then their betrothal would be broken and, if word were to reach Laufey, the truce with Jotunheim would be invalid. Would Thor really be willing to risk that for a quick fuck? To keep that decision out of Thor's hands, Loki's hand moved down to take the prince's cock in his hand.

Thor hissed when he felt those cool fingers wrap around him. His eyes practically rolled back in his head when he felt Loki's thumb move lightly over the head, smearing precum over the tip.

Leaning up, Loki whispered in Thor's ear, "I may not be able to be with you as I'd like, but I can give you this, my prince."

"Loki-" Whatever Thor was planning to say was cut off when Loki pressed a firm kiss to his lips.

The prince groaned into the kiss, parting his lips. Loki followed suit and soon Thor's tongue was sliding over his own. Loki closed his eyes and tried to ignore the feeling of it as he focused on pumping Thor's member with his hand. He swallowed Thor's moans of pleasure and didn't push away when one of Thor's arms wrapped around his back, pulling him in close so that their chests were touching. Loki stayed calm, tried to breathe deep, and only opened his eyes once he was sure that Thor was lost to his throes of passion. Looking over Thor's shoulder, he tried to determine
which area would be best for what he had planned.

It needed to be a darker area, one that would mostly be overlooked by the guards who passed through the vault. The nooks containing the Flame and the gauntlet were too bright. The one with the Warlock's Eye was a possibility, but it was too far away. Loki couldn't stop his ministrations and get to it without raising suspicion. The nook behind Thor and to the left, though, that one held promise. It contained the ancient and broken Tablet of Life and Time. Of all of the treasures in the vault that Loki had heard about through legend or rumor, the tablet was one of the few artifacts that Asgard could lay full and legitimate claim to. The tablet was a container for the Lifeline Formula, created by Bor, and gifted to his children. The formula had the power to rejuvenate, heal and grant the users the chance to reach their full evolutionary potential, making them near immortal and near omnipotent. From what Loki understood, the secret of the formula was gifted to Idunn and placed into her golden apples, thus granting the full power and strength to the Aesir. It was a great treasure of Asgard, but also one that was overlooked in favor of the weapons in the vault. It was perfect.

Loki mulled over his options in his mind of how to get to the Tablet without any questions from Thor. Fortunately for him, Thor provided him with the perfect excuse. The hand that wasn't holding him close had moved back between his thighs, the fingers again attempting to stimulate his clitoris. Hadn't Loki already made his feelings about that clear?

Rolling his eyes in annoyance, Loki pulled himself away from Thor. Thor whimpered - actually whimpered - from the loss of contact. It was such a delicious sound that Loki had to smile, which confused Thor. The prince again opened his mouth to speak, and again Loki silenced him with a kiss. As they kissed. Loki pushed against Thor, walking him backwards, off of the polished stone walkway, until his back hit the wall next to the nook. Thor grunted at the impact, eyes opening to shoot Loki a questioning look. His betrothed was looking up at him again with that smile that seemed far too shy and innocent, considering the position that they were in. Even more so when Loki dropped down to his knees before him.

"Loki, what are you doing?"

_"Giving you what you always wanted. Me, pliant and beneath you."_ Loki thought bitterly. That old anger and hatred began to gnaw at him again. Clawing its way from the back of his mind like some kind of rabid beast. Was he really about to do this? He had given a lot of ground over all of these years, compromised a lot of himself in pursuit of his justice. If he does this now, though, will he have given away too much? He was about to become the ergi everyone accused him of being - that they wanted him to be. Will it be worth it?

From the corner of his eye, though, Loki could see the soft blue glow emanating from the Casket. He could feel the seidr of his people - the gift of the Norns, the spirit of Ymir - calling out to him, reaching out for its kin. He thought of the power the Casket held, thought of the good it had done for Jotunheim, and the destruction that power led to. Then he thought about two little boys, huddled together in fear in the blood-soaked snow. He thought of a mother crying out for his children. He thought of a baby, cold and alone, stolen from his home. Then he knew, the sacrifice of his pride would be a small price to pay.

_Sentiment._

He took a deep breath to steady himself, put his hands on Thor's hips and - after forcing himself to look up into Thor's blue eyes - opened his mouth. Thor didn't need to be told what to do next. With a wide grin, he tangled his fingers in Loki's dark hair and pushed his hips forward. Loki had to tighten his grip on Thor's hips to keep himself steady when he felt the tip of Thor's cock press...
against his lower lip. The head was smeared with the fluid of Thor's precum and it left a foul taste on Loki's tongue. Thor was looking down at him expectantly, waiting for him to get on with it. Truth be told, Loki wasn't quite sure what he was supposed to do.

In Thor's mind, this was Loki's second time giving oral pleasure, but Loki's doppelganger had spared him before. Shame he couldn't rely on it now. What Loki knew of this kind of pleasure mostly came from dirty limericks and disgusted gossip of court ladies. It would be easy to just open his mouth and allow for Thor to take the lead, but Loki needed to be in absolute control in this moment. If Loki became more focused on trying not to choke on Thor's massive length, then he will not be able to do what he set out, and after all of this, that was unacceptable.

The tip was poking at his tongue impatiently. Loki gave it an experimental lick and Thor let out a tiny moan. Loki did it again, this time running his tongue flat over the leaking tip, followed by a swirl with the tip of his tongue. Thor moaned a little louder and tightened his grip in Loki's hair. Alright, Loki could work with this. When Thor pulled his head closer, Loki wrapped his lips around the head of the cock and began to suckle. More of that awful, salty taste fell on his tongue, making Loki shudder. Oh, if his younger self could see him now. He would likely fall on a sword to save himself the shame of this. Nothing to be done about it now, though. If his younger self had been more willing to compromise, then perhaps he wouldn't be in this situation now.

Loki was suddenly pulled from his thoughts when his head was roughly pulled forward. His mouth was suddenly full with Thor's massive girth. His lips were stretched to the point of pain, his jaw creaked, and he gagged as he felt the tip of the cock at the back of his throat. Loki dug his nails into Thor's hips and tried to push away, but the prince held him in place. Saliva was slipping from the corner of his lips as his tongue moved along the veiny underside of his cock, trying to expel it from his mouth in vain.


_Just shut up, fool!_

Still, Loki took the prince's advice and breathed deeply through his nostrils. After a moment, he felt his throat relax and it became easier to handle, though his jaw was beginning to ache painfully. Once he found a good balance, though, Loki hollowed his cheeks and began to suck. Thor moaned loudly and petted Loki's hair, encouraging the younger prince to continue. Loki kept his eyes focused on Thor, watching his reactions. For a moment, their eyes met and Thor smiled warmly down at him. It was too fond of a look for Loki to handle. There was far too much emotion and passion in that look, and Loki had to wonder once more, why. Why was Thor so adamant about the two of them forming a relationship? Why did he like Loki at all, for that matter? And why did he want Loki to care about him? Was Odin this adamantly about gaining Frigga's affection, he wondered. Well, if that was the case, then it seemed to be a family trait to have tunnel vision when it came to what they wanted.

Trying to ignore the gaze, Loki shut off his mind and let his body go on autopilot. He managed to find a good, somewhat clumsy rhythm of sucking and licking the shaft. It was amateurish and messy, but Thor didn't complain. Loki continued his ministrations slowly - he couldn't rush this - and waited for the right moment. He kept his gaze on Thor until finally, finally, Thor closed his eyes and rested his head against the wall. Loki waited a moment just to be sure, taking his time by pulling back as much as Thor would allow so that he could swirl his tongue around the tip of the cock. Thor's eyes stayed closed throughout his grunts and pants of pleasure.

Seizing the opportunity, Loki pulled back the hand that Thor had cut in order to mix their blood. The blood had mostly congealed and scabs were forming, so Loki had to dig his nails into his palm...
to reopen the wound. To keep Thor distracted, Loki increased his speed, bobbing his head to take Thor in and out of his mouth. The thunderer groaned and bucked his hips towards Loki, his eyes remaining closed. When the wound was opened, the blood seeping from the cut, Loki put his hand on the wall next to Thor's hips. Looking quickly from Thor to the wall, Loki smeared the blood over the wall until there was enough staining the marble.

Loki kept up his work on Thor, trying to keep himself steady despite the prince's hip thrusting. With his finger, he began to write the runes onto the wall with his blood. This was a very special spell, one that required extreme attention to detail. It had taken years for Loki to find in his various spell books, only coming across it by chance when Fenrir tracked his muddy paws over the pages he was reading one day. Loki had given him an extra large portion of meat from the tables that night. The spell worked as a portal, though, sadly, not one as strong as the Cave, or else Loki would have just used it for his own escape. No, this portal would only allow for a temporary transfer through the realms, for at most four or five people. The runes for the portal would need to be drawn in the opposite location as well, and could only be activated by the original caster of the spell. It was a long shot, but it was the best one Loki had at the moment.

Thor was moaning Loki's name and saying something about being close, so Loki scrambled to finish the spell. By this point, Thor was too far gone to let Loki finish him off with his amateurish blowjob, so he fisted both hands in Loki's hair and began to viciously fuck the younger prince's mouth. The head of Thor's cock was hitting the back of Loki's throat, gagging him and making him lose his focus, but he had to force himself to concentrate on his work. If the spell was not performed to exact specifications, then it would not work, and all of this would have been for nothing.

"Fuck!" Thor grunted. "Coming."

Though Thor had tried to hold Loki's head in place so that he could release in his mouth, Loki managed to pull himself free from those strong hands and remove his mouth from Thor. It saved him from having a mouthful of that awful taste, but unfortunately, the downside was that it left Thor free to spill his load on Loki's face. Sure enough, within seconds of pulling away, the warm fluid of Thor's seed hit Loki's cheek, lips and chin. Loki felt the rage and shame boiling inside of him, threatening to spill over and break his charade.

"For that, Odinson, I will take my time in killing you. Slowly, intimately, in all the ways you fear, you will die by my hands.

"Sorry," Thor smiled sheepishly. He did not look sorry in the least.

His broad chest was heaving from panting, sweat pooling at his temples. One of his large hands moved from Loki's hair to his cheek, the calloused thumb gingerly wiping away the sticky fluid. Loki turned his eyes away from Thor, feigning embarrassment. While Thor was busy trying to wipe his seed from his betrothed's cheek, Loki drew the last rune on the wall and quietly whispered the words to finish his spell. The blood red of the runes changed color to Loki's signature green, glowing brightly, before fading, sinking into the stone of the wall and disappearing completely.

"Loki," Thor called down to him softly. "Are you alright? You did this last time. Going quiet, I mean."

Taking a small breath to calm himself, Loki looked back up to his betrothed and gave him a small, shy smile. "I am well, Thor. I just... it is strange, doing such a thing. It was nice, and I loved being with you, but..."

"You need not worry so much over it, Loki," Thor smiled assuredly down at him as he cupped his
cheek. "You did well, much more active than last time. You just need more practice, is all."

"Of course," Loki agreed. "Whatever I can do to please you, my prince."

"You mustn't be so formal about it," Thor laughed. "We will have many more intimate nights in each others company. We will have years to know each other... And I must say, I do look forward to learning what it is that makes you quiver and scream your pleasure."

"...As do I, Thor."

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That night, after Thor had returned Loki to his rooms in secrecy, Loki sat at his desk and penned two letters; one to Surtr and the other to his mother, Laufey. By the afternoon of the next day, the letters were gone. Two weeks later, he received a long reply from Laufey. The response from Surtr would come a month later, when Muspelheim declared war on Asgard.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the bottom! In the next chapter, we will have Thor's coronation, and Loki's great escape. Stay tuned!
The war between Asgard and Muspelheim would be considered a relatively short one, by the Aesir’s standards, lasting only three years. The suddenness of the Fire Giants’ declaration of war caught many by surprise, as all of the realms believed that Odin had put an end to Surtr’s reign when he took possession of both the Mind gem and the Eternal Flame millennia ago. Odin, as well, was caught off guard with Surtr’s choice for war. The last he had heard from the Fire Giants, their numbers were lower than even the Frost Giants of Jotunheim, and their world was in a constant state of chaos. They had not the power nor the discipline for battle against Asgard. Surtr, however, was adamant in his choice for war. He claimed that their numbers did not matter, for he had gained the support of anonymous allies. With their assistance, Surtr was guaranteed victory against the mighty Aesir once and for all. So confident he was, that he had named his flaming great sword Twilight, signifying the twilight of the gods. It made for quite the laugh at court.

The Aesir did not see combat until a year after the war was declared, much to Loki’s disappointment. He had hoped that, given their innate bloodlust, Odin would command his armies to march into Muspelheim straight away. It would have given him some peace, anyway. Unfortunately, Loki had to deal with a year full of listening to Thor’s non-stop excitement of the possibility of going into war. Thor has gone into battles before, fought to help settle the occasional outbreaks in the realms, but this was to be his first true and proper war. The golden prince of Asgard was desperate to finally get the chance to prove himself on the battlefield. He wanted to prove to everyone—mostly his father—that he had what it took to command and lead in the manner worthy of a king. He would talk Loki’s ear off, telling him of invasion strategies, battle tactics, and his desire to swing Mjolnir down on Surtr’s skull himself.

Loki played his part. He dutifully listened to Thor and encouraged his plans, while still telling Thor of his fear of the war. Prince Loki could not imagine seeing his betrothed march off to what may be his death. If he were to go, Loki’s tears would fall for everyday that Thor would be gone, and he will not leave his window. Instead, he would look out onto the horizon, waiting for his betrothed to return to him. Thor liked hearing that.

Thor was a permanently by his side until the day Odin finally decided that it was time to invade Muspelheim and crush Surtr’s forces before they could gain any true power. The only he had delayed so long was because he wanted to gather information on Surtr’s supposed allies. As it was, though, no one could find any information on them, not even Heimdall with his all-seeing eyes. Odin believed perhaps that Surtr was lying, but his great sword contained a powerful seidr that the Fire Giants did not possess, nor even knew how to wield properly. Someone else had forged it for him, but no one knew who.

Odin wanted to wait until he had all of the answers, but the people cried out for war. The common and noble-men alike begged for their opportunity to prove themselves glorious in battle and the other realms implored Odin to put an end to Surtr’s war before he could do any real damage.
Already Surtr’s forces had made an attack against Svartalfheim. Queen Alfylse demanded immediate response from the Allfather, but it was he who held the power in this situation and no action would be taken until he decided so. After a year of begging, though, Odin finally gave in to his people’s demands and mobilized his armies.

Loki was among the crowd of soldiers’ women, including Queen Frigga, as the first wave of the army departed from the Bifrost. They were being led by Odin, Thor and his friends, even the Lady Sif. She, more than any other, was anticipating this war. Unlike the other warriors, this may be her only opportunity to prove herself in battle. If she should survive, she would finally have proven herself worthy of the title of warrior and protector of Asgard. Loki found himself hoping for the best for her, despite his desire to see every last one of them burn in the fires of Muspelheim. May her death at least be glorious.

Before he was sent through the Bifrost, though, Thor was allowed to say his goodbyes to his mother and Loki. Queen Frigga held herself with the proper grace befitting a queen, but her tears were still brimming with the grief of having to send her one and only son off to war. Thor hugged his mother tightly and promised that he would return to her, carrying with him Surtr’s head.

When he turned to Loki to say his goodbyes, Thor said nothing for a long time. The prince merely took Loki in one arm, pulling Loki flush against his chest, while his other hand rested at the back of his neck. Loki was used to that hold by that point. Typically it was the hold Thor would use whenever he wanted to lock his betrothed in a passionate kiss. It left Loki little mobility to escape, should he desire to. Usually by this point, though, Thor’s tongue would be shoved in Loki’s mouth while the younger prince gasped for breath. This time, though, Thor just held Loki tightly and looked deeply into his green eyes. It was a sad, tender look, one that—no matter how many times Loki has seen it—will never get used to. Perhaps it was because whenever Thor would look at him this way, Loki would be reminded that for some reason, the other prince actually did feel something for him. Whether it was love or not, Loki didn’t know, but he did not want it.

“Why do you not speak?” Loki asked when he got fed up with that look from Thor.

“I am trying to create a memory,” Thor answered.

“Of what?”

“If I am to die, then I want the last thing I remember to be you, in this moment now.”

“Don’t speak of such things, my prince,” Loki said, looking away as if Thor’s words affected him. Thor used his hold to force him to look back.

“I mean it.” Thor smiled sadly. “Loki… I may not return from this war. I am battle-trained and I have no doubt of my worth as a warrior, but in war, anything is possible… If I do not survive, then I want my final thoughts to be of you and me here in this moment. I want to think about how far we’ve both come and how we feel about each other now… If I die, know that I love you, Loki.”

Pretty words. Thor may be the biggest oaf in the realm, but Loki found that he could be quite eloquent when he put his mind to it. A lesser person would have swooned in his arms and wept rivers of tears at the thought of their separation. Loki was not a lesser person, though. However, Thor was looking into his eyes, expecting a response. While Loki may have feigned his affections over these years with Thor, he refused to tell him that he loved him. That was one lie that even he could not force himself to speak.

Instead, Loki closed the distance between the two of them with a heated, passionate kiss. Thor responded to it with a desperate kind of enthusiasm, pulling Loki so tightly against him, as if he
could somehow absorb the younger prince into him. When Thor finally pulled away, he kept the closeness by resting his forehead against Loki’s, his calloused thumb tracing the skin of his cheek.

“Will you weep for me if I fall?”

“I will throw myself upon your pyre, Thor.”

“Would you truly?”

“Yes,” Loki nodded. “As it is, though, I rather like living. So please ensure that you return home victorious.”

“You have my word, my love,” Thor chuckled. Thor leaned in for a final kiss and Loki allowed it.

“Go on now,” Loki said. “Your war awaits.”

“I promise I will return to you.”

Thor took Loki’s hand in his own and brought it to his lips. Loki feared for a moment that he was going to prolong this goodbye for as long as he could, but thankfully Volstagg finally pulled Thor away. The large warrior had already said his goodbyes to his wife and their son, so he was the only one who could understand Thor’s reluctance to leave his loved one behind. If Hogun or Fandral had tried, they would have likely received a broken jaw for their troubles. Volstagg, though, was able to drag Thor into the arch of the Bifrost entrance, where Thor transformed instantly from lovesick prince to hardened warrior under the eye of his king and father. Then, moments later, the gate of the Bifrost began to spin, a flash of light shot out into the darkness of space, and the warriors were gone. Thor was gone.

Slowly, those who had gathered on the bridge began to turn away back to their homes. It was Loki’s desire to return back to the palace as well and continue his planning, but Queen Frigga remained standing at her spot, looking towards the gate of the Bifrost. It would be improper for Loki to leave before the queen, so he stayed by her side and waited for her to finish whatever thoughts were plaguing her mind.

“The Allfather did not say farewell,” Loki said.

The queen did not look at him, but kept her gaze forward. “We said our goodbyes to each other in private earlier. This is not the first time I’ve sent Odin off to war, so there is no longer a need for such a public display. I am here for my son.”

“I am sure that Thor will return. Your husband will as well.”

“He always does,” she said. Though her words were civil, the tone of her voice held some bitterness to it. Loki had to keep himself from laughing.

Frigga remained there before the gates of the Bifrost, just staring forward. Loki thought that perhaps she was fearing for her son, but she knew Thor to be a capable warrior. He would survive the trials with the Fire Giants. It took him longer than he would have liked to realize, though, that Frigga was not staring at the gate of the Bifrost, though, but beyond it, out into the vastness of space. He tried to recall the last time he had seen or heard of Frigga visiting the Bifrost, but found that he could not remember such a time.

“Do you still dream of Vanaheim?” Loki asked. To Frigga’s credit, she was not taken aback by his words. She did not react at all.
“Every night.”

“What was it like?”

“. . . I can no longer remember. You should consider yourself lucky, Loki, to have been brought to Asgard before you had the chance to forge memories of your homeland. Not all of us are so fortunate.”

Frigga finally turned away from the Bifrost and began her slow march back to the palace, a member of the Einherjar flanking her on each side. Loki stood back and watched her go. As strange as it was, between the two of them, perhaps he was the lucky one.

Three years. For three beautiful, blissful years, Loki was truly free for the first time in Asgard. With Odin away fighting his war, Frigga and the council of Asgard had taken control over the throne, leaving no one to act as spies for Odin. For the first time in Asgard, Loki was free to do as he wished. So, for the first few months of his freedom, he did absolutely nothing at all. He did not attend court nor the feasts, he did not participate in the women’s sewing circle—though he did occasionally spend time in the company of Sigyn and Nana—and some days he would not even get out of bed in the morning, despite Hulda pulling his legs and threatening to drench him with ice cold water. Loki did nothing, and it was the most peaceful thing he’d ever experienced.

Luckily for Loki, Asgard’s belief of him as an ergi was so firmly set in their minds that they mistook his apathy for heartsickness. Poor prince Loki is so young and loving. His poor, faint heart cannot bear the thought of his love so far away. Didn’t you hear? A servant girl found the young prince sobbing in his bed, clutching the Mjolnir pendant Thor had given him in his hands. The poor boy is so devoted. Loki had no idea who started these vicious rumors—most likely Hulda, just to spite him—but he allowed them, as they held his cover.

On days when Loki did feel like venturing out of his room, he would shift back into his familiar old animal skins. It had been so long since he had taken his magpie form that Loki had forgotten what a wonderful feeling it was to be soaring through the skies above the world. Some days he would shift his skin into that of a wolf and run through the fields with Fenrir. Other days, he would shift into the skin of another Aesir and travel through the outer villages, visiting the long-halls and attending the things. It had been so long since he had the opportunity, and Loki found that he missed immersing himself in the common life.

Of course, it couldn’t all be fun and games. During those three years, Loki had a lot of planning to do. It had been Loki’s hope that as Asgard was distracted by the war, he could fulfill his plan to infiltrate the weapons vault and take what he needed. Unfortunately, during times of war, the guards protecting Asgard’s weapons were doubled and Heimdall was instructed to keep a constant gaze on the vault. Odin had always been wary of traitors within his house, and rightly so. Loki couldn’t enter the vault again without the aid of Thor, so he would be forced to wait.

Unfortunately, Loki could not jump ahead in his plans to go through the Cave of Time again until he had all of the details lined up. If he went through the cave to Midgard and returned with the Tesseract, he would be discovered by Heimdall instantly. Though his pact with the gatekeeper was still intact, Loki had no doubt that Heimdall would honor his oath to Odin, should the son of an enemy king appear with one of Odin’s greatest weapons in hand. So Loki was forced to wait. Wait and continue to make his plans.

For those three years, though it became more difficult for Loki to contact his allies. With Odin away at war, people began to question Hermes’ sudden appearances in Asgard. Though the messenger could feign a need for audience with the queen, it was beginning to become suspect. Hermes could hide himself easily from prying eyes, but he was still reliant on the specific portal to
return him to Olympus. Heimdall would start asking questions soon. Luckily for Loki, though, his
dam was desperate for contact with him and willing to receive Hermes on Loki’s behalf. From the
safety of Jotunheim, Hermes could carry out Loki’s messages and his will.

When he could, Hermes would deliver Loki messages from his allies. Surtr was most grateful for
Loki’s assistance in this new battle and assured his compliance, provided Loki grant what he
desired at the end. Little Hel was just happy to have such friendly correspondence, as her current
playmates were no fun at all. Though Loki’s idea for a new game had them all excited for the first
time in their undead lives. She had told her people of Loki’s idea and now they were all so eager to
play. She was just waiting for Loki to begin the game. He assured her it would be soon.

As for Laufey, he was just happy to have some form of contact with his stolen child. So desperate
he was to hold Loki in one hand and Odin’s still beating heart in the other that he was willing to do
whatever Loki asked, without question. Loki thanked his dam for that and always made sure to put
in his messages his desire to be reunited with his mother soon. Manipulative? Perhaps, but Loki had
to put his emotions on the backburner if he wanted his plan to work. He did want to see his dam
again, to finally find a place in the Nine where he belonged… but what he wanted more was
Asgard burning.

For three years he planned and schemed. For three he corresponded with his allies. For three years
he enjoyed what little freedom he could by sneaking away from the Aesirs’ prying eyes. Then, one
day, his time ended. He had done all he could and it was time to truly begin. Loki sent out his
demands, and a month later, victory was declared in the war for Asgard.

The Warriors Three were the first to return into the palace gates. Fandral and Volstagg raising their
arms up high in victory as they drank in the adoration of the crowd. The Lady Sif followed shortly
behind them, still bruised and bloody from her battles. Though Loki saw that she tried to keep her
expression neutral like a proper warrior, he saw the way her eyes lit up as the crowd chanted her
name. This is what she had been wanting her whole life, the recognition and acceptance of her
people. Loki tried not to begrudge her for it.

Other warriors and members of the Einherjar trickled in after, each receiving their own ear-
shattering applause or being met by their family. Women burst into tears at the sight of their loved
ones returning, their men grabbing them and spinning them in the air. Children cried out for their
fathers. Even the mighty Volstagg shed a tear or two as he held his son in his arms again. Touching
moments. Loki watched their actions, trying to take it all in. He knew how to play the whimpering,
devotional lover well enough, but he wasn’t quite sure how to react to being reunited with his love.
On Asgard, he’d never been away from Thor long enough to have the practice. Tears seemed to be
the best way to go. Become so overwhelmed with emotion that he’ll run weeping into his beloved’s
arms.

For the moment, though, he composed himself much in the way that Queen Frigga was. He stood
by the queen as she was seated in her place on Hlidskjaf. She looked out among the crowd with the
serene expression that always seemed to be plastered to her face. Loki stood by her side, with
Hulda at his right-hand side. His nurse, aside from cheering along with the crowd for the returning
heroes, was constantly straightening the fabric of Loki’s gown and telling him to stop fidgeting.
Nearly a millennia with this woman, and she still treated him like a youngling.

Loki was close to telling the woman off when suddenly the crowd erupted in another ear-shattering
round of applause. Loki looked to the hall’s great entrance and saw that Odin had appeared. The
old king was standing calmly before his people, a member of the Einherjar flanking his sides. The
Allfather was still wearing his blood-stained armor, and Loki noticed that he was leaning heavily
on Gungnir. Frigga stood from Hlidskjaf and began to walk down the dais towards him, her face
still calm and serene. Loki faintly wondered if she was like him, hoping that she would be spared this reunion.

The crowd parted and quieted down to a hush as Frigga walked toward her husband. After a moment, Odin, too, began to walk forward to meet her half-way. His steps, though, were slow and seemingly forced. He leaned on Gungnir for each step that he took and the Einherjar were close by his side, as if they were afraid that their king would fall at any moment. The war had taken its toll on the Allfather. Loki had to fight a smile as he watched the frail, old king force himself to remain steady.

Long, grueling moments passed before the king and queen were finally standing before each other. The couple did not embrace each other as all the others had. Instead, Frigga bowed her head slightly in a show of respect. Odin’s shaking hand reached and grasped the back of her neck. Frigga leaned forward and kissed Odin’s cheek, eliciting another cheer from the crowd. Loki saw that the couple did not pay any mind to it, though. He could see that Frigga was saying something to Odin, to which he shook his head and gave some sort of reply, his head turning back towards the entrance of the hall. Frigga nodded and then put an arm around Odin’s waist. Odin stood straighter with her assistance, and he was able to raise his arm and hush the crowd.

“Citizens of Asgard,” Odin spoke out to the crowd, his voice still booming despite his frail demeanor. “It is with great pride that I announce that the nine realms are safe once more. The giant Surtr is defeated, cast back to the realm of fire that birthed him. In the quest for this peace, many lives were lost. We shall honor our dead, now residing in the halls of Valhalla, and the sacrifices that they have made to protect all of Yggdrasil.

“We shall also honor our mighty heroes who have returned victorious to us.” Screams of applause followed his words, but another raised arm silenced the crowd. “Each of the men here today are warriors worthy of song and praise. Citizens of Asgard, honor them. Cherish them. Celebrate their deeds, and be thankful that they have returned home to you.”

Words of agreement spread through the crowd.

“Citizens of Asgard, it is with great pride that I now ask that we honor the one responsible for our great victory over Muspelheim. The man who led our army straight into the front lines of the Fire Giants, who rallied our troops in times of hardships, and who delivered the final strike that forced Surtr to surrender. Citizens of Asgard, I ask that you honor the man who I am proud to call my son and your future king, the mighty Thor.”

Always one for the theatrics, it was in this moment that the doors to Valaskjalf opened once more, revealing Loki’s betrothed. Thor, like his father, still wore his bloodied and damaged armor. His winged helm rested atop his head, holding his hair back out of his face so that all could see his smug, satisfied look. With a great roar, Thor raised Mjolnir over his head, the sound of thunder appearing in the distance. The crowd screamed their excitement and Thor drank in their attention, raising his arms up in victory as he walked out towards his mother and father. The people chanted his name, wept, and threw roses at his feet as he passed by. Thor looked out over the crowd, smiling brighter than Loki had ever seen. He had waited a long time for this day to come. Not as long as Loki, though.

As Thor drank in the attention of the crowd, Loki watched and planned his move. He saw that Frigga was watching her son with a more genuine smile on her face, no doubt pleased to see that her son had survived his war. Odin, too, was looking at Thor with something akin to a pleased smile, though it seemed a bit strained, almost forced. The old king seemed more tired than anything else, forcing himself to go on for the sake of the show. Loki watched, patient, as Thor
embraced his mother, hugging her tightly as a small tear slipped from her closed lashes. There is nothing more beautiful than a mother reuniting with her child. Except, perhaps, for two lovers reuniting.

Being so practiced in feigning his emotions by that point, it was no trouble for Loki to conjure a few tears of his own. He held them back, keeping them unshed as if he were trying to compose himself. His lips parted and he took tiny gasps of breath, as if he were struggling for air. He clenched one hand in the bodice of his gown, close to his heart, drawing attention to the panting of his chest. Hulda noticed him first and tenderly took hold of his free hand."

“Loki?” She whispered. “What’s wrong, child?”

Loki choked on his breath, unable to form words. His eyes, now an even more stunning shade of green with his unshed tears, looked from Hulda out to the royal family, where Odin was placing a hand on Thor’s shoulder. Hulda followed his gaze to Thor and looked back at Loki.

“Because he has returned?” She asked, a hint of suspicion in her voice. No matter how much Loki played his game, Hulda will always remain the one person he could never fully convince. She raised him, after all. She would always know his heart. It was not her place to question him, though.

“Go to him, if that is what you wish.”

“B- but, that would not be proper,” he forced out.

“I believe that everyone will forgive the impropriety this once. Go on, Loki. Have your moment.”

Loki nodded and kissed Hulda’s hand. As if it were fate, Thor chose that moment to turn his head in Loki’s direction. Their eyes met and the world around them seemed to fade away. Loki smiled more brightly than he ever had, the tears finally slipping down to his cheeks, as he took off in a run towards his betrothed. Thor ran to him as well, pushing right past his mother in favor of holding his beloved in his arms again. Shocked, the crowd fell silent, watching the two lovers sprint towards each other until they crashed into each other’s arms with such force that Thor’s helm fell from his head.

The second Loki was in his arms again, Thor lifted the smaller prince in the air, twirling him as their lips connected in a forceful, heated kiss. Loki suspected that Thor would do such a thing, so he wrapped his arms tightly around Thor’s shoulders and held on. He would have wrapped his legs around him too, but he supposed that would be a bit too scandalous for their reunion. He needed to win the crowd’s trust, not feed their imagination as to what occurs between them behind closed doors.

When Thor placed his feet back on the ground, the two princes parted, but rested their foreheads against each other, looking deep into each other’s eyes. Loki smiled and let out a sad laugh. Thor wiped away a falling tear with his thumb.

“[I was so afraid I would never see you again,” Loki whispered.

“Nothing could stop me from returning to you. I would have defeated all of the soldiers of Hel if it stood between us.”

With the intensity in Thor’s eyes, Loki knew that Thor meant it. His heart truly belonged to Loki now, just as he thought Loki belonged to him. The prince of Asgard had visions in his mind of sitting high on Hlidskjalf with Loki by his side, of Loki’s stomach growing full and round with his
child, of leading Asgard into its most prosperous years by joining the feuding realms of Asgard and Jotunheim into one peaceful kingdom. He had visions of glory and of love. Visions that made Loki’s plan to burn them all to cinder that much more beautiful. So beautiful, in fact, that Loki had to kiss Thor again just to keep himself from laughing.

This time, there were sounds of approval from the crowd. Cheers, applause, cooing sounds, they all blended together after a moment and Loki dismissed them all, pretending to have only eyes for Thor. A hand on his shoulder pulled him away from Thor, though, and Loki was turned to face Odin and Frigga. The queen’s face had fallen back into that unreadable look of serenity. Odin, however, did not look amused. The brow over his one eye was furrowed, showing obvious displeasure. Whether from Loki’s actions or from Loki’s presence himself, though, the prince did not know. Loki forced a blush to his cheeks and looked down to the ground, embarrassed for his actions. A warm hand slid into his own, though, and squeezed gently. A kind act from Thor, but still displaying his possession.

Odin banged Gungnir on the ground several times to quiet the audience one last time. Everyone turned their eyes to the Allfather, waiting to hear what the king had left to say. Loki had his suspicions, and the way Thor squeezed his hand so tightly were only confirming them.

“People of Asgard,” the Allfather’s voice boomed out, “my son has proven himself worthy in battle time and again. With this last victory, though, he has proven that he has the mettle of a true king. And so, people of Asgard, it is with great pride that I announce that in three seasons time, I will be stepping down from the throne. Thor has proven himself worthy to rule, and I trust that he will be a fine king.”

There was no outright applause for this announcement, which shocked Loki a little. Murmurs of confusion were heard instead, spreading far and wide among the people. Thor squeezed Loki’s hand a little tighter, grinding the bones of his knuckles together. It took a shout from Thor’s obnoxious blonde companion—“Hail King Thor!”—for the unease to pass and the people tentatively began to turn from confusion to glee.

“At the end of the summer solstice, Thor will be crowned your new king,” Odin announced.

“And then we shall finally be married,” Thor whispered into Loki’s ear.

“You have no idea how long I have waited for this,” Loki whispered back. If only Thor knew how much he meant it.

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The three seasons before Thor’s coronation date seemed to drag by at a snail’s pace for Loki. Perhaps it was because it was the moment he had long been waiting for, or because it was the moment he was dreading the most—to find out if all of his planning had been for naught. There was nothing Loki could do but go through the motions of his days, waiting for the time to come. His allies had all been contacted and given their instructions. They too were simply waiting for the exact moment that Loki’s plan could be carried out and, like Loki, they were getting anxious. Hel and her companions were ready to play, and they were growing petulant the longer they had to wait. The child queen promised that she and her people were going to be very cross with Asgard for making them wait so long. Loki promised her that Asgard will receive their punishment for making them wait.

Surtr, too, was growing impatient with every passing day. Though, Loki supposed that he had more reason to be than Hel. Since the end of their short war, Surtr’s name had become synonymous with failure throughout the Nine. The bards sang songs of his cowardice, of how he turned and ran in
the midst of battle, throwing down his sword before the feet of the Odinson in defeat. Men in
taverns joked of Surtr’s great exaggeration of his supposed powerful sword that was meant to
“bring about the twilight of the gods.” Even King Freyr—with his own powerful, gleaming sword
Tyrfing—had joined in on the mocking of Surtr, saying that he could defeat the Fire Giant with
nothing but an antler. Obviously, Surtr was desperate to get on with it and reclaim his honor and
vengeance. Loki assured him that he will have both soon enough. That and much more.

As for Laufey, the king of Jotunheim was surprisingly patient with him. He had been in his isolated
kingdom, deprived of his child and his sanity, for near a millennium as it was. He had enough faith
and trust in his child to allow him to do things in his own time, trusting that they would be together
again at the end of it all. Loki promised his dam that they would. As soon as Asgard was in flames
and Odin’s lifeless corpse lay before Hlidskjaf, then would Loki and his dam be together again.
Not a moment before.

Aside from his waiting and planning, though, Loki could not find a moment of peace. His days of
studying and training had been taken over by Thor constantly demanding his presence. The
Thunderer claimed that the three years apart had taken its toll on his heart, and so he could not bear
to be parted from Loki for more than a second. Annoying as it was, Loki allowed it. He allowed
having almost every waking moment of his time taken over by Thor, reminding himself that soon it
will be over. Soon Thor will regret ever laying a hand on him. The reassurance could only comfort
him so much, though, as Thor soon began to move the topics of their conversation to their wedding.

Facing a true battle had apparently given Thor a grasp on his own mortality. Though the Aesir
were ancient creatures, capable of lives reaching near immortality, they could be killed by
something as simple as the blade of a sword. Thor decided that even his life-span was too short to
waste, and he wanted to be married to Loki as soon as the Gungnir was placed his hand. He made
his want known to any and all who would listen. Odin was against the idea of combining the
events, but Frigga forced him to compromise. Thor would be crowned Asgard’s new king
immediately following the summer solstice, and Thor and Loki will be married the following days
after.

On top of having Thor constantly by his side, Loki was now burdened with the task of arranging
their marriage. Queen Frigga and Hulda both took their time to assist Loki in his duties for
planning the wedding. The feast for the wedding would be combined with Thor’s celebration feast
and would last for three days, ending on the Friday that they were to be married. The Queen herself
would perform the ceremony as the goddess Var presides over it. Following the ceremony, after
their wrists were bound with the bangles containing the lover’s runes—binding them solely to each
other for the rest of their days—they would be ushered away immediately to consummate the
marriage and, hopefully, produce an heir. Odin would be bearing witness to that glorious event….Loki could hardly wait.

Perhaps it was a blessing, though, that Loki was reminded of the upcoming ceremony day in and
day out. If anything, it only fueled his resolve to succeed in his plan. He had to succeed, because
the alternative was not an option.

He kept that thought in mind as Frigga reminded him of his duties, when the maids fitted him for
his gown, when Hulda tried to gently prepare him for what he could expect on his first night, and
when Thor would whisper his lewd words of excitement in his ear. He tried to think of these as
motivations, not deterrents. Soon, he reminded himself. Very soon, it would end.

***

Nine hundred years in Asgard. Nine hundred years of lies, humiliation, indignities, and
compromise have all lead to this moment now. Nine hundred years of manipulating a small child into the hateful creature that Loki saw reflected in his mirror. Nine hundred years of being told that he was burdened with a glorious purpose. Today, he would fulfill that purpose.

Loki’s face was blank as he looked forward into his mirror. All around him, the servants were busy packing away his meager possessions while two maids were fitting him in his coronation gown. Hulda stood behind him, combing out his long hair and weaving in strands of gold with ruby studs. While Loki kept a look of indifference, Hulda seemed as if she were close to tears. Her lips were turned downwards to a small frown and every so often, the tip of her finger would touch the corner of her eye, no doubt wiping away a tear before it could fall. Loki had no idea what she was so sad about. This wasn’t happening to her.

“My lord,” one of the servants called. Loki didn’t turn, but looked to the woman through the mirror. Her eyes were cast down to the floor, afraid to look at Loki even through the reflection. Ever since the incident with his magic, very few servants felt comfortable speaking to him.

“M-my lord,” she started again, “Will you be requiring all of your tomes in Bilskirnir? Or are there only a few that you wish to take.”

“Why wouldn’t I want them all?”

“I… I did not mean to cause offense, my prince. It is just that… You and your husband will not likely need them…a-after you are married.”

“For Norms’ sake, Yara, pack them all,” Hulda called over her shoulder, saving Loki the trouble.

The girl nodded quickly and went straight to Loki’s bookshelf, grabbing up all she could in her arms.

“Why exactly wouldn’t I need my books?” Loki asked.

“Once you move into Bilskirnir with Thor it will be expected that you and he…perform your marital duties.”

“I will leave the bed at some point, though,” Loki huffed.

“Yes, but it is still expected that you will perform your wifely duties, much in the same way as Queen Frigga. There will be no more lessons or training with either your knives, spear or magic. You will be responsible for the finances of your house. You will sit with Thor and hear the favors of the people, making proper judgment when necessary. And, you will aid Thor in whatever matters of the state he deems it necessary to share. There will be no time for yourself anymore.”

“Is that so?” Loki laughed. “Then why let me take my tomes at all?”

“Because I know that they make you happy, and that’s all I ever wanted for you.”

Loki looked at Hulda’s reflection in the mirror as she wiped away another unshed tear. He saw that she was mostly done with her work on his hair, but was still running her fingers through the strands fondly, a wistful look in her eyes.

“The ceremony is not for another three days, Hulda. Do not look so forlorn.”

“It may not be for another few days, but this is likely the last moment I will have with you alone. I may not get another chance to tell you how proud I am of the young man you’ve become, nor how much I love and will miss you.”
“This is the day that you and everyone else has been preparing me for all of my life. I thought that you would be happy when it finally came.”

“It was your tutors’ and the royal family’s duty to prepare you to be Thor’s queen. My duty was to raise you and care for you as my own.”

“But I am not yours.”

“…No,” she sighed. “I did not bring you into this world, but that does not mean that I did not care for you any less. No matter how much of a little viper you are at times, Loki, you will always be that small babe I held in my arms and sang to sleep. Please try to remember that, no matter what happens.”

Hulda leaned forward and put a kiss to his hair. Loki opened his mouth to say something to her, but she turned away and left the room. Loki did not understand Hulda. Nor did he understand why he felt so sad at watching her leave him for the last time.

“Prince Loki?” A voice came from below him.

Loki looked down and saw that one of the women who had been hemming the train of his gown was attempting to speak with him.

“We are finished, my prince,” she said as she stood. “Is there anything else that you require of us?”

Loki looked back to the mirror to take in his image. As this was to be the most important day of Thor’s life, it was expected that Loki be dressed finer than he ever had. His gown was a dark crimson colored silk, with golden embroidery of roses sewn into the gown’s bodice. The train lay in a puddle of fabric at his feet, but when he walked it would stretch out nearly five feet and require his servants’ assistance to carry. The sleeves of the gown rested below his shoulders, exposing his collarbone—Thor did like it when he exposed his skin, after all—while the end of them fell long past his hands. It made Loki feel like he was too small for the clothing, but this was the style of the women of court. On his head there lay a gold circlet with three teardrop rubies dangling from the piece and resting against his forehead.

So much red and gold, from the gown to the bangles around his wrists and ankles. The color did nothing for Loki. With his pale complexion it only served to wash him out, instead of highlighting what was already naturally beautiful within him. This wasn’t about him, though. He was not intended to look beautiful for himself, but to compliment Thor, the future king. There was no better reminder of that than the damned silver Mjolnir pendant around his neck, shining brightly against his pale skin.

“No, I believe this will do well enough,” Loki told them.

“Yes, my prince,” the woman bowed her head. “If you are ready, the Einherjar will assist you to Valaskjalf.”

“That will not be necessary. I know my own way, and I wish to have some time to myself.”

“My prince, if I may be so bold to say—”

“You may not,” Loki dismissed.

With that, Loki stormed out of his room one last time as the servants stopped their packing to stare
at him with bewildered expressions. Members of the guard were walking after him down the hall, but Loki needed these last few moments alone in peace. Using his invisibility charm, Loki disappeared from their sight and made towards Valaskjalf at his own pace. Soon it would be happening. Very soon.

The entire population of Asgard seemed to be crammed together to witness this glorious event for their realm. Young and old, all were there, pushing and shoving their way for a chance to view the crowning of their new king, to bask in his golden glow if only for a moment. The last time Loki had seen the great hall this filled was most likely the day he was presented to the court. How fitting it was then that his moment in this great hall should mirror his first.

Loki was not set to be on the dais just yet. As far as the ceremony went, Loki was meant to enter with Queen Frigga, followed by Thor’s friends and soon-to-be advisors, Sif and the Warriors Three. Odin would enter from his private room behind Hlidskjaf, so that he doesn’t have to walk amongst the crowd and he can remain looking down on all others. After everyone was in their places, Thor would enter, kneel before his father, and swear his oath as King and Allfather of the realm.

Before Loki went to his assigned place for the ceremony, though, he decided to take one last moment to explore on his own. If this were to be the last time he’d have the chance, he’d at least enjoy it. As he was exploring closer to the hall—searching for possible weak points in the architecture—he saw the faint glow of a fire and heard the unmistakable voice of his betrothed shouting “Another!” followed by the sound of a shattering glass. It seemed that the prince was starting his celebration early. How lovely.

As Loki peeked around, though, he noticed an odd look in Thor’s eyes. His blue eyes weren’t twinkling with the smug sense of satisfaction that they normally held, nor were his lips turned up in that insufferable smirk. Instead, Thor looked almost scared. Doubtful even…. For Norns sake, Thor was nervous! Oh this was too good for Loki. Holding back his laughter to a dull smirk, Loki dropped his invisibility charm and stepped out of the shadows.

Thor spotted him immediately and his expression quickly changed to a more pleased one, though his smile still seemed a bit forced.

“Loki, what are you doing here?” Thor walked up to him and quickly put his arms around his waist. Loki reciprocated by placing his arms around Thor’s broad shoulders.

“Shouldn’t you be with my mother and the others?”

“Oh I have some time yet,” Loki smiled. “The question is, what are you doing here alone? I thought that you would speak with your friends one last time as a mere prince, instead of a king.”

Thor’s smile dropped a bit and his eyes looked down. “I… I just needed a moment to myself before this all began.”

“Nervous, Thor?”

“Have you ever known me to be nervous?” He laughed.

“Well, Lady Sif did tell me of a certain time on Nornheim-”

“That was not nerves,” he interrupted, “just the rage of battle. And the Lady Sif would do well to keep such things to herself.”
“Ah, right,” Loki nodded.

They fell into a moment of silence. Thor hugged Loki close to him and rested his chin on Loki’s exposed shoulder. Loki ran his fingers through Thor’s blonde hair and listened as Thor gave a small hum of contentment. Not even Fenrir was this easy to please. Loki knew just what to say to make Thor’s tail wag.

“I’ve looked forward to this day as long as you have,” Loki told him quietly. “You are my love and my friend. Sometimes I’m envious… but never doubt that I love you.”

Thor tensed in Loki’s arms. The younger prince knew what his words meant to Thor, a man who desired love and affection from all he knew, who craved for it even if he wasn’t aware. In all of their time together, only Loki has ever denied him this affection. He’d chased after and bullied Loki for years just to reach a place of truce, and it took even longer for Loki to even reciprocate any of his advances, but never once had he ever heard Loki actually say that he loved him. Truthfully, he never thought that he would.
The words burned on Loki’s tongue, but as Thor pulled back to look into his eyes, he said them with all of the sincerity he could muster.

A smile—a true one this time—slowly broke out on Thor’s face and his eyes shone with that look of affection that he was wont to give. One of the hands around Loki’s waist moved upwards to the back of his neck, his thumb caressing his cheek.

“Thank you.”

“Now give us a kiss,” Loki grinned.

Thor laughed before he pulled Loki in by his neck and kissed him firmly. Loki expected a full ravishing as usual, but Thor kept it blissfully short this time. He smiled fondly down on Loki.

“How do I look?”

“Like a king.”

“And you my beautiful queen. With you by my side, we will be the envy of all the Nine.”

“…It’s time, Thor.”

Thor frowned slightly and pulled himself back from Loki, the hand on his neck trailing down his arm to take his hand. “You go ahead.”

“Are you sure?”

“Go on,” he insisted. “I will be along.”

Thor kissed his hand before he gently pushed him forward. Loki gave the prince one last smile and turned away. It was odd, really. This is the moment Thor had been waiting for since he held his first training sword in his hand, and yet he was the one who was nervous now. Loki, on the other hand, was calm. He was ready. It was finally time.

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Whatever anxious feeling Thor was harboring in his solitude seemed to disappear instantly as he stood before the audience of Asgard. As all of the eyes of Asgard looked out to their new king, Thor slipped easily into his role, as he always did. He held his arms up high, smiled his golden
smile, and waved to his adoring crowd. Women swooned when his blue eyes met theirs. Adoring followers threw flowers at his feet. Children were raised on their parents’ shoulders in order to catch a glimpse of their mighty hero.

“Is that him, Momma?” A little boy whispered shyly into his mother’s ear.

“Yes, dear. That is our new king.”

“He’s so strong,” the little boy said in awe.

“That he is.”

“Someday, I’m going to be just like him!” He declared. The mother smiled brightly and kissed her son’s cheek.

Yes, Thor’s nerves were long gone now. It was because in this moment that he realized, no matter what, he was truly beloved in the eyes of the Aesir, just as his father was. He was finally worthy. Even though it had been centuries since he was first able to wield Mjolnir, this was the first time Thor felt as though he were truly worthy.

Thor’s steps gradually slowed the closer he approached Hlidskjaf. His father was still seated there, his back straight in a regal pose as his one eye carefully regarded his son. To the left of the dais, Thor’s friends, the Warriors Three, stood in a row. Their hands were clasped in front of them and their backs were straightened in a serious manner, but they grinned at their friend as he approached. This was an important day for them as well.

On the right-hand side, standing in a row like the Warriors, stood the Lady Sif, Loki, and his mother. Thor’s glance shifted to them for a moment and he saw that Sif was composing herself in a professional manner, hand on the sword at her waist and eyes shifting about for any perceived threat. His mother was watching him with her warm smile. And Loki—his beautifully Loki—stood between them, looking as calm and regal as always.

Once he reached the dais, Thor’s eyes turned back to his father. Though Odin’s gaze as stern, it did not deter the smile from Thor’s lips. He knelt down before the throne and placed Mjolnir at his feet, but he could not help looking back once more at Loki. Smiling brightly, Thor winked to his betrothed. Loki’s eyes looked down and away. Not the reaction that Thor had wanted, but he supposed Loki was nervous as well. After all, once this was over and done, the feasting would begin and in three days they would be wed. It is only natural for him to feel anxious.

Odin stood from Hlidskjaf, his weight leaning heavily on Gungnir. Though it was a secret known only to the members of the royal family, the reason that the coronation was being rushed so was that the last war had taken a toll on the Allfather’s health. They were lucky that the Odinsleep didn’t come upon him mid-battle, but it could only be put off for so long. It is likely that, after the wedding ceremony, Odin will induce the sleep and be at peace for however long he needs. The Allfather is trusting Thor to be ready.

“Thor Odinson, my heir, my firstborn,” the Allfather’s voice boomed out over the crowd. The smile slipped from Thor’s face slightly as he tried to appear as stern and serious as his father.

“So long entrusted with the mighty hammer, Mjolnir, forged in the heart of a dying star. Its power has no equal! It’s a weapon to destroy or as a tool to build. It is a fit companion for a king. A king who will build a new and bright future for Asgard by uniting the realms together as they were meant to be… I have defended Asgard, and the lives of the innocent across my realms in the time of the great beginning…”
As the Allfather droned on and on with his speech, the few guards assigned to watch the weapons vault were unaware of the faint glow of a green light emanating from the nook behind the Tablet of Life and Time. They didn’t feel as the air began to chill and frost slowly spread upwards from the stone walls. They were unaware of red eyes piercing through the darkness, until the swords of ice pierced their chests.

One by one, the small number of guards in the vault were struck down by the three enemies they never thought to encounter. One member of the guard attempted to run—Valhalla be damned—and even managed to make it to the door of the vault, but before he could make his escape, a large blue hand grasped his neck from behind. The pain was too intense to even scream as the metal of his armor cracked from the intense cold. The skin turned black before he could draw in his next breath, spreading out down his spine and up to his skull. He can’t move his limbs, his blood freezes within his veins and the cold air emanating from his foe chokes him as he gasps for air. It is almost a mercy when the Jotun snaps his neck.

Once the room is cleared of guards, the three panting Jotun warriors stop and gather together. Each of them look to the other, expecting one to say some final words of comfort. They know what they must do, the sacrifice they must make.

“For Laufey-King.”

“For Jotunheim.”

“For Loptr Prince.”

Taking in a deep breath, the largest of the Jotun warriors walked forward to the relic that is calling out to him with more intensity than a siren’s song. The Casket, the Fimbulwinter of Ymir. His sire and dam had for centuries told him of the glory of their world before the fall of Jotunheim and the theft of the Casket, of the prosperity and joy. Now there was only sadness and death in their world… He would gladly give his life for this cause, to restore Jotunheim to its glory. Slowly, he reached his hand out towards the Casket.

For one glorious moment, he could feel the power of Ymir spreading through him, making him whole, as the gate containing the Destroyer slowly began to open.

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“Do you, Thor Odinson, swear to guard the Nine Realms?”

“I swear.”

“And do you swear to preserve the peace?”

“I swear.”

“Do you swear to cast aside your selfish ambition and to pledge yourself only to the good of the realms?”

“I swear!” Thor shouted, raising Mjolnir high in the air.

“And on this day, I, Odin, Allfather, will proclaim you…”

Odin stopped suddenly, his head raising up in shock. Everyone regarded him curiously, waiting for
him to finish the coronation and proclaim Thor as king. What came out of his mouth, though, was a silent, “Frost Giants.”

Though it was nothing more than a mere whisper, the words crawled into the ears of every Aesir in Valaskjalf. Naturally, chaos ensued.

Frightened children began to scream as their mothers picked them up and attempted to flee. Men and women alike screamed in terror at the sound of their enemy’s name. Some attempted to run, others sought out their loved ones in the crowd or tried to avoid being trampled to death. Members of the Einherjar quickly formed together, some trying to keep the peace, others drawing out their weapons and looking about for an attack.

The people were running about so wildly that Thor had to step up on the dais just to avoid being run into. Lady Sif and the Warriors Three were quick to form a protective line before the royal family, weapons drawn and ready. Frigga, always the protective mother, put herself before Loki to keep him safe. Seeing that all who he cared for were alright, Thor pushed past his friends and marched to his father.

“Father, what is it? What’s happened?”

“Frost Giants in the weapons vault,” he answered. “Three of them. The Destroyer has them now, but they had the Casket in hand.”

Thor did not miss the way that Odin’s one eye looked over his shoulder to Loki.

“Father, do not even think it,” Thor warned, raising Mjolnir.

“It is hard not to, when today of all days our enemy decides to break our truce.”

“Perhaps they’ve seen that you’ve grown weak and vulnerable,” Thor countered. Thor had never seen such an indignant look from his father before. “I will break their spirits, just as you once did, but you will not lay a finger on Loki. He has done nothing. Look at him! He is petrified.”

Indeed Loki did appear to be horrified. He was clutching tightly to Frigga’s arm, looking about at the madness of people screaming and running. His wide, shining green eyes looked to Thor to comfort as he trembled in fear.

Loki’s doppelganger made a convincing performance.

As Thor kept his eyes locked on his beloved and all others screamed in their panic, no one noticed the red-haired stranger standing calmly amongst the crowd. They didn’t see the way his eyes lit up in glee, nor the upward curve of the corner of his mouth. Loki took one last moment to enjoy the scene before he teleported himself away.

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Only once he was inside the Cave did Loki let his glamor drop. Red hair turned black, freckles vanished, leaving the skin a smooth pale color once more, and blue eyes darkened into an emerald green. With a flick of his wrist, his plain tunic and trousers were transformed into his battle garb. No one on Asgard had ever seen it before, as he was not a warrior in their eyes, merely another maiden. It was something that he had collected in his travels with Hermes to Svartalfheim, and one of Loki’s personal favorites.

He was covered head to toe in leather and bronze with green silk. His chest-plate was a sturdy dark metal, topped with a collar of bronze and wrapped over with layers of thick leather. His breeches
were made of thick leather with a sheet of chainmail woven into the fabric and metal studs protecting his thighs. His boots were long, reaching up to his kneecaps and armored with bronze. His arms were covered in layers of wrapped leather, topped with decorative sheets of bronze. Over this, he wore a long leather coat that reached his neck, again protecting his chest and shoulders with thick sheets of bronze.

The garment was thick and heavy, and it did not help his problem with overheating in this realm, but after spending so long being exposed to Asgard and its people—to Thor—Loki wanted to be covered up and protected with as many layers as he could. Besides, it went quite well with the horned bronze helm he and Hermes stole from Nidavellir.

Loki was all too happy to see that said helm was still lying safe amongst the other pieces of his collection, untouched since he was last in this cave. Whistling a tune to himself, Loki picked it up, along with his spear, and marched towards the rune room of the cave. Just as he had hoped, the room was already occupied.

“Lovely Loki,” Hermes grinned, hazel eyes raking up and down Loki’s armored form. “Aren’t you a sight to behold.”

“I rather like this armor myself,” Loki laughed. “I do believe that green is my color.”

“It is, but I believe that you are far more fetching in blue.”

“Well, should all go according to plan, you will see me in blue all the time.” Loki smiled again, but he felt his hands begin to tremble. Now was not the time to be getting cold feet.

Sensing his friend’s trouble, Hermes put his hand on Loki’s arm and gently squeezed. “I could go with you, if you would like me to?”

“No,” Loki shook his head. “I need you here. The Cave will bring me back to the exact moment after I’ve left, but there is always the chance that they will discover me gone before I can depart. With the Jotun in the vault, it is likely that Heimdall is scanning every inch of the realm, regardless of our deal.”

“I thought that your doppelgangers were perfected by now?”

“They are,” he nodded, “but you can never be over-prepared. The Jotun should provide enough of a distraction now, but if they do discover me gone, I need you here to defend the Cave.”

“Against whatever giant warrior they throw at me and your man-bear of a fiancee? You don’t know me very well, do you lovely Loki? I am an orator, not a warrior.”

“Flee if you must,” he sighed. “But at least try to flee to me and warn me. And I told you not to call him my fiancee.”

Loki lightly punched Hermes’ stomach. The messenger doubled over as if in pain.

“I will run to you faster than even my wings can carry me,” he promised. “Do be careful, Loki… and think about what it is you plan to do.”

“I have thought about it, Hermes. Every day and night since we last left this cave. I will not stop… I can’t stop.”

“I understand,” Hermes said, bowing his head. “I wish you all the luck in the world, my friend.”
“Thank you, Hermes. In all of my time in this place, you have been my one constant good. I can never repay you for that.”

Leaning forward, Loki put his lips to Hermes’, something that he had not dared to do since that night down by the waters. He knew he was risking Heimdall’s gaze, but he could not leave Asgard without this last thank you to his friend. Hermes kissed back gently, savoring the taste of his Loki one last time. When they pulled away, he was pleased to see that, for a brief moment, Loki’s green eyes had turned to their beautiful shade of crimson.

“Goodbye, my lovely Loki.”

“I will only be gone a moment, Hermes,” he laughed softly. “Not even enough time to miss me.”

“I will miss you every second you are gone from my sight.”

“Enough,” he smiled. “I must go.”

Reluctantly, Hermes dropped his hand and allowed Loki to walk by him to the pillar. Loki took the sack of runes and spilled them onto the top. When they asked what he sought, Loki spoke confidently and clearly, “I seek the Tesseract. I seek freedom.”

Immediately, the third stone indicating Midgard rolled away. Taking one last deep breath, Loki stepped forward and allowed the darkness to take him. Within a second, he was gone.

“May you find what you seek, lovely Loki.”

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Going through the vortex was typically a nauseating, terrifying experience. This time, though, Loki had never felt better, nor more complete. Even as the vortex spat him out onto the ground, Loki retained his composure. He landed on his feet in a grassy area, surrounded by large trees. In the distance, he heard the sound of people’s laughter and chatter and piercing honking noises. Looking past the trees, Loki saw large, shining buildings reaching up into the sky. He knew this place, he had been here before with Hermes. New York City, the mortals called it. A concrete jungle of people rushing about like ants. And somewhere, in all of this speed and chaos that the mortals called home, the Tesseract was hidden.

Smirking to himself, Loki took a step forward to begin his search.

“That’s enough right there, Mr. Laufyjarson.”

Loki turned his head quickly and raised his spear at the voice and saw a man, dressed in a dark suit with strange dark glasses covering his eyes, step out from behind a tree. The man’s expression was unreadable, but he was emanating a calm aura. His shoulders were relaxed, hands clasped together loosely over his groin, and his head tilted slightly upwards.

“Who are you, and how do you know me?”

“I am Agent Coulson, of SHIELD, and we’ve been expecting you for some time. So, let’s say you put down the spear and we’ll go someplace comfortable to talk?”

“And if I refuse?”

The sound of leaves crunching reached his ears and suddenly nearly thirty men and women stepped out from behind trees. Each one of them were carrying small weapons, raised and pointed
at Loki. Well, this is a scenario he had not seen coming…

“You know, I’m not sure how much voltage it takes to taze a god, but it would be fun to find out.”

“…Fair enough, mortal,” Loki nodded.

While he wasn’t sure just what was happening now, he knew when he was outnumbered. At the moment he was not an enemy to these people. He did not need to give them a reason to think that he was. So, with a nod to the Son of Coul, Loki lowered his spear.

“Excellent,” he smiled. “Now come on. If we leave now, we can still make it back to base in time for dinner. It’s lasagna night.”

“How did you know I would be here?” Loki asked, gesturing to the other agents. “Because this does not seem like a leisurely stroll.”

“I already told you, Mr. Laufeyjarson; we’ve been expecting you for some time now.”

Chapter End Notes

And we're back on Midgard! Loki is gonna meet some old friends and possibly make some new ones. Good times ahead.
His knuckles began to bleed after he had gone through the fifth punching bag. Steve was surprised that it had happened so soon. Ever since the injection of the serum, Steve’s cells had been able to regenerate at an almost super-human level. He didn’t get bruised anymore, and things like cuts and scrapes were typically healed within the hour. Now, though, his blood was smearing on the bag. The harder he punched, the more leaked from the opened wounds on his knuckles. He didn’t even register the pain, though. His thoughts were too clouded to even think about the pain.

Running through the Black Forest as the bombs went off around him. Gunshots going off by his ear, but still he kept running.

He punched harder.

Bucky holding on tightly to the loose rail as the train sped over the open abyss.

“Hang on! Grab my hand!”

He reached out his hand, but it wasn’t quick enough. The rail broke and all he can hear is Bucky’s screams, he can see that look of terror in his eyes as his best friend falls to his death. Steve couldn’t call his name, couldn’t even speak as he collapsed against the train, willing away what he’s just seen.

Steve punched so hard that he heard a bone crack. He kept punching over and over again.

He’s back in that plane, speeding over the Arctic Ocean with enough bombs to level the Northeast. “There’s not enough time. I’ve got to put her in the water.”

He put her picture on the attitude indicator to remind him why he was doing it.

“Peggy?”

“I’m here.”

“I’m gonna need a rain check on that dance.”

Steve could hear another bone crack, he almost felt it that time too.

“A week next Saturday, at the Stork Club.” She was crying. He never thought a woman as tough as Peggy Carter would cry over a nobody like him from Brooklyn. “Eight o’clock on the dot. Don’t you dare be late. Understood?”

The earth was approaching fast. He didn’t want it to be over yet.

“We’ll have the band play something slow. I’d hate to step on your—“

He didn’t get to finish. The plane hit the water, shattering the glass of the windows. Steve was thrown back from the impact. The control panel was destroyed, as well as all communications. There’s no way for him to contact SHIELD, no way to contact Peggy. The water was slowly beginning to rise as the plane sank further into the water. Even through his thick boots, he could feel how ice cold the water was. There was no way out… But a sense of calm came over him.
Schmidt was dead. The Tesseract was gone. New York was safe. Peggy was safe.

Steve knew that when he put the plane in the water, he most likely wouldn’t make it out alive. It was ok, though. His mission was done. He kept her safe… Knowing that made it a lot easier to lay down and wait for the water and the cold to take him.

“Oh my God… This guy’s still alive!”

Steve growled and punched the bag so hard that it broke off the chain and slammed into the wall across the room of the gym. There went bag number six. It was then that he could finally feel the blood running from his knuckles and feel the throbbing of his two broken fingers. The pain was nothing at all.

Steve turned and grabbed another punching bag. He was panting heavily and couldn’t hear the sound of footsteps on the other side of the gym. He focused again on hitting the bag with all his might, hoping that it could somehow knock away all of the memories.

“Trouble sleeping?” A voice called.

Steve briefly looked over his shoulder and saw Fury standing there watching him, wearing his signature dark trench coat. He looked the same now as he did the day he collected Steve from Times Square, and Steve briefly wondered if the man even owned another outfit. What did it matter anyway? Steve turned back to the bag.

“I slept for seventy years, sir. I think I’ve had my fill.”

“Then you should get out there. Celebrate. See the world.”

Fury began walking toward him, his hands coming from behind his back, revealing a manila folder. Steve didn’t have the energy or the patience to deal with that right now. He turned away and began to unwrap the white cloth from his hands, noticing the splotches of blood. His fingers were still throbbing, but the bones would set within a couple of hours. Nothing to worry about.

“When I went under, the world was at war. I wake up, they say that we won. They didn’t say what we lost.”

They didn’t say what Steve had lost. His friends, his life, his sense of belonging in the world. Steve fell asleep and woke up in a world that he didn’t recognize. Now he had SHIELD looking over his shoulder every second, waiting for him to adjust to the new world order. He didn’t know if he ever would.

“We’ve made some mistakes recently,” Fury admitted. “Some very recently.”

“Are you here with a mission, sir?” Steve cut to the chase.

“I am.”

“Trying to get me back into the world?” Again.

“You could say that.” Fury opened the folder and held it out to Steve. The photograph inside caught Steve’s interest immediately and he finally stopped and turned to look.

“I believe that you’re familiar with this SHIELD case file. In August of 1943, while engaged in combat with the special unit HYDRA in Baden-Württemberg, Germany, a body was discovered and taken to SHIELD headquarters by one Captain Steve Rogers. The person recovered was found
to be alive, remained unconscious for three days, before waking up and literally vanishing from one of the most secure locations in the world.”

“Well, he didn’t vanish right away. He did stick around for dinner first.” Steve looked down at the grainy old photo of the young boy he had carried out of the Black Forest. It was one taken of him just after he was brought into the medical unit of headquarters. His face was covered in dirt and cuts from his fall in the woods, his arm bleeding from the gunshot wound.

Suddenly, Steve’s mind is back there, back in the Black Forest. The shots are firing all around him. HYDRA’s foot soldiers try to stay on his heels, but he’s faster than they are, he’s stronger. He’s already ordered the Commandos on ahead. The tank is coming after him, the bullets firing past his head. He turns and fires off a couple of rounds, he thinks he hears one of the HYDRA soldiers scream. From somewhere ahead Gabe is shouting for him to retreat. He’s trying, but the rounds from the tanks are going off all around him. He feels a piece of shrapnel hit his thigh, but he keeps running. He just has to make it back to the Commandos… But then he sees the naked body of a boy on the forest floor. The closest village was thirty miles to the west. What the hell was this kid doing here? Then the kid is moving and all other thoughts go out the window. The gunshots are getting louder, the soldiers drawing closer, the tank rolling down anything in his path, but all Steve can think about is that this person needs help. He’s probably going to die. The kid is probably already dead. Still, Steve can’t just ignore it. He jumps in front of the boy and raises his shield.

“Captain Rogers?” Fury’s voice cut through Steve’s thoughts, and suddenly the image of the Black Forest fades away, and Steve is back in the gym. His bleeding hands were shaking.

“Any reason in particular that you're digging up the past, Sir? Or was SHIELD cleaning out their cabinets and thought that I would appreciate the nostalgia?”

“Sarcasm,” Fury laughed slowly. “I didn’t think they taught that during the Depression.”

“Well, we had to come up with something to keep our spirits up while waiting in bread lines. It was either that or… you know, be depressed.”

“Good strategy.”

“The real reason for this, sir?”

Fury slowly took the folder from Steve’s hand and turned to leave the gym. “Get changed and be at headquarters in fifteen minutes. It seems that a bit of your past has caught up with you.”

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Loki didn’t know what exactly lasagna was or how it worked, but he knew one thing for certain, it was pretty damn delicious. On Asgard, the only food that was offered were various meat, certain fruits and vegetables, breads, and the occasional sweet. These Midgardians, though, had somehow managed to combine their various grains with layers of cheese, meat, and tomatoes to create a dish so heavy and fattening that Loki was sure it was a sin against nature. Naturally he had already devoured three plates of the dish and was currently working on his fourth.

From across the table, the Son of Coul was quietly regarding him as he picked at his half-eaten plate of lasagna. In most situations such as these, his silent staring would be used as an intimidation technique, something to keep the suspect guessing. Phil has been told that he has quite a frightening stare, after all. At the moment, though, his silence wasn’t tactical, rather it was one of awe. It was quite a spectacle to watch someone put away that much food in under ten minutes. It was bizarre and fascinating, and he couldn’t look away. Maybe this was why those hot dog eating
contests always drew in such a crowd… He would have to consider signing the kid up for one after this, provided that he wasn’t hostile.

When Loki took his final bite of the fourth plate of lasagna, Phil decided it was finally time to get this interrogation started.

“I take it they don’t feed you too much back where you’re from?”

Loki looked up to the agent and curved his lip upward in a smirk. “I am expected to keep a lithe appearance, but I never go without.”

“You know, there is a fun story about you down here involving an eating contest. I always thought it was just a fable, but after seeing how quickly you put away that pasta, I’m starting to see the truth of it. I’m a bit rusty on my Norse mythology, but I believe it was something about how you and a fire giant got into an eating contest. You lost, though, because the fire giant ate the food, the bones and the table.”

Loki let out a surprised laugh. “Your first assumption was correct, this story about me is false. I’ve never been allowed much interaction with people of the other realms, let alone been given a chance to enter any eating contests. Though, I do know what you’re talking about. The incident occurred between the fire giant Logi—an insufferable twat—and the gluttonous boar of a man named Volstagg. How my name became substituted for his, well that is a question for your Midgardian scholars.”

“Interesting,” Coulson nodded. “Unfortunately too many wars have been fought over questioning religious dogma, so I’m afraid that mistake will have to stand.”

"Fair enough, mortal. Tell me, what else do your people know about me?” Loki grinned and leaned back in his chair, folding his arms over his chest. He had a feeling he was going to be with these mortals for a while. He may as well enjoy himself while he was here. “Come, tell me and I can tell you if you’ve got it right or not.”

“Sure,” Coulson answered. He leaned forward and put his elbows on the table, folding his hands together so he could rest his chin.

“You’ll have to forgive me if I can’t remember everything I learned from my Norse Mythology class in college. I just needed the credit and there was a cute girl who let me copy her notes… Ok, then. For starters, you were born on Jotunheim.”

“True.”

“You were blood-brothers with Odin.”

“False. Very wrong, in fact.”

“You were described as having red hair.”

“False… Well, on occasion I do, but you should have no way of knowing that.”

“You’re a shapeshifter.”

“True.”

“You’re married to the goddess Sigyn.”
“False,” Loki groaned. “Though she is a lovely girl. I would almost call her a friend.”

“Almost?”

“I’m not allowed to be alone in her company for too long without raising suspicion about either of our virtues.”

“Really now? So you’re an immortal virgin?”

“Not by choice. And that is all I will say on the matter, now continue.”

“Well, that last answer took away my next Norse god fact. You have seven kids. Six sons and a daughter. One is a giant snake. Another is a wolf. Another son is an eight-legged horse, and the daughter is the goddess Hel.”

“Now how did you Midgardians ever come up with that?” Loki laughed incredulously. “I do own a wolf, Fenrir, who I treat as if he was my own, but I most certainly did not birth him. Hel is a sweet little girl, I’ve visited her on a few occasions, but again, she is not of my loins. I know nothing about the snake and the horse.”

“That’s odd, because the myth was pretty descriptive about a horse. Something about a wager with a wall and you changing shape into a mare to seduce a horse.”

“Well, that part is mostly true, but still—”, Loki cut himself off mid-sentence as he suddenly remembered the way several of Thor’s friends would snigger in his direction for many years after the wall incident. Word had gotten out about how he lured the great Svadlifari on a chase, but Loki never knew exactly why that was so funny. Well, not until this moment.

“Those sons of whores,” he grumbled.

“Kids can be cruel,” Coulson nodded. He looked down at his plate of lasagna and decided to take another bite before getting down to business. He savored the taste in his mouth for a moment before pushing the dish away and pulling out a large manila folder containing one of SHIELD’s most classified files.

“You’ll have to forgive the human race for their misinterpretation of you over the centuries. If it makes you feel any better, though, our organization is all about fact-checking.”

Coulson flipped through the files before pulling out a photocopy of an old text containing runes. “Let’s see… You know, I’ve never been able to read these things. To me they just look like trees… Dancing trees. Anyway, from what we’ve translated there was a large-scale battle in Tønsberg, Norway. There’s something in here about blue, frozen giants and the gods of old coming to Earth through a rainbow bridge.”

“You actually have record of that? I would have thought that tale would have fallen into legend by now.”

“Well, humans do sometimes have the fun habit of writing things down. When gods and giants fight on Earth, I imagine that’s something noteworthy. We were lucky, however, to find record of this. Most accurate Norse history is difficult to find, thanks to expanding and conquering empires.”

“Why would the history be hard to find?”

“You should know this by now. One of the first things that conquering nations do is destroy local histories, cultural production, and language. Makes it harder to pass on old traditions to newer
generations and sets up the grounds for colonialism. You know, acquiring and exploiting an indigenous nation.”

“Yes,” Loki nodded slowly. “Yes, that does sound familiar now that you give a definition to it… What else do your files say about me?”

“As I said, Mr. Laufeyjarson, we humans tend to write things down. From the looks of it, you were apparently a very busy boy throughout history.”

Coulson paused to pull out several photos from the folder and turned them on the table for Loki to see. There was one with two highly stylized figures of pale men—one with bright green eyes, the other with tiny wings at his ankles—surrounded by Egyptian hieroglyphs. The next was a restored tiled mosaic depicting a woman—still with long dark hair and startling green eyes—dressed in Roman garb and locked in the embrace of a handsome bearded man. Another was a photocopy of a very beautiful sketch of Loki, and the prince was able to recognize the style of his Renaissance man instantly. There was a copper engraving of the dark haired woman and the bearded man, this time the woman wearing an off the shoulder gown with a tight green corset and matching petticoat. The next picture was one of Loki, without the disguise, unconscious from his first encounter with the mortals of Midgard. The last was Loki and his friend dancing on top of a graffiti wall as throngs of mortals cheered and took their sledgehammers against the wall.

Loki’s eyes lingered on the last one and he smiled. “That was a fun day.”

“I remember watching it on television, but I imagine that it must have been quite the experience. Particularly when Hasselhoff began to sing in that light-up leather jacket.”

“You know, I never quite understood what that was about, but the people of that land seemed to enjoy it, so who was I to judge.”

“Hasselhoff was an important staple of pop culture.”

“How exactly do you have all of these pictures, if I may ask? I’ve only revealed myself to you mortals once before,” Loki pointed to the unconscious picture of him in his youth, “and you did not have all of this information about me then.”

“After your initial visit to Earth, SHIELD began investigating past instances of any extraterrestrial contact. The result was…quite fruitful, to say the least. Why didn’t you say before that you knew Da Vinci?”

“Because I didn’t at the time. The last time I spoke to your authorities was actually my first time in this realm. My means of conveyance here is never quite precise on when I arrive, but I tend to make the most of it when I do.”

“And how do you plan on making the most of this visit?”

Loki paused and studied the agent across from him. Agent Coulson was naturally a suspicious man, he would have to be in this line of work. Loki, however, was equally suspicious. The other man was searching for something, likely some kind of excuse to keep Loki locked up in this agency’s base for testing. These mortals’ technology has advanced so much since the last time he spoke to them. Though they were still a bit behind Asgard.

“I haven’t decided yet. I had thought about taking in a show. Can you recommend any good ones?”

“The Book of Mormon has been getting great reviews. But did you really need the armor and spear for a night in Manhattan?”
“From what I remember, this was a very dangerous city. One can never be too careful.”

“What are you really doing here Mr. Laufeyjarson? And where is your companion, the one with you in all of these pictures?”

“Hermes? He and I are not always attached at the hip,” Loki said, rolling his eyes. “And I resent the accusation that I would be on this realm for reasons that would be viewed as nefarious. As you’ve seen, I’ve visited this realm many times over the course of your history, and no destruction has come yet… Now answer me this, Son of Coul, how did you know I would be arriving today and where I was going to be? Even I did not know the location of my final destination.”

Instead of answering right away, the agent turned his attention back to the folder. He rummaged through it until he seemed to find what he was looking for and pulled out more pictures.

“Tell me, Mr. Laufeyjarson, what do you know about mushrooms?”

“Disgusting looking plants. They tend to pop up around decaying organic matter. Why?”

“Actually they’re fungi, but we’ll skip that part of the biology lesson. Anyway, you see these here,” he pointed to the picture and Loki recognized the fairy ring. “These are a specific species of mushroom called Marasmius oreades, or Scotch bonnets. They’re fairly common in North America and Europe. They tend to grow in more grassy areas, like meadows, forests and the like… So imagine the surprise of a few archeologists when they discovered fossilized imprints of these mushrooms in the Giza Necropolis. Then some more in Tonga. Then in New Mexico, Baghdad, India, the Lapland areas of Finland, and all other sorts of places where they just shouldn’t be… Although Iceland was no surprise at all.”

“So you found the fairy rings,” Loki nodded. “It still doesn’t quite explain how you knew where I was going to be, especially if they are common.”

“Do you know anything about the maintenance and up-keep of Central Park? A privately owned, non-profit organization is responsible for overseeing all of the needs in the park. Clean-up, restoration, horticulture, all that good stuff.”

“Fascinating,” Loki sighed with a roll of his eyes.

“There’s a point, I promise.”

“Please get to it, then, while I still have a few good millennia left in me.”

To that, Coulson raised his eyebrow slightly before clearing his throat and continuing on. “As I was saying, they take care of all horticultural needs. Including, but not limited to, removal unaesthetic plant-life. As sad as it is, fungi are not top priority on tourists’ list when they go through Central park…Don’t really know why they care, though. There’s a really cool zoo with these penguins that are—”

“Son of Coul,” Loki interrupted. “You’re getting off track again.”

“I do that sometimes, you’ll have to forgive me. Anyway, for the past year, in a very particular part of the park, a naturally occurring arc started to form under the ground. Of course, some people complained about fungi growing in the area, so a team was dispatched to deal with the problem. Funny thing, though, no matter what they did, it didn’t have any effect. They tried to dig it out, they poured organic poison on it, they did everything short of nuking the damn thing, but no matter what, the fairy ring kept growing. Well, whoever is in charge of these things did some digging around, and apparently the only other time a fairy ring of Scotch bonnets have ever occurred in
Central Park was all the way back in 1991.”

The agent stopped and pulled yet another series of photos from the envelope revealing a darkened amphitheater. There were silhouettes of thousands of people, all looking towards a stage where a red haired man was holding a microphone and standing next to a man with wild hair and a large top hat. Coulson laid out the photos detailing the red haired man shouting something at the crowd. The next photo was of the man mid-air as he was jumping into the crowd, followed by a shot of a large man in a yellow security shirt pulling him out. The next few photos were images of chaos, of people wildly swinging their fists at each other, bones breaking, a guardrail and stage being rushed. And in the midst of all of this chaos, there was another photo of two members of the crowd who had managed to rush the stage. The photo was zoomed in, losing some of its quality, but the image of Loki—with teased up hair, ripped blue jeans and a studded leather jacket—could be seen grinning over the madness. Naturally, Hermes was standing next to him, a protective hand on his shoulder and ready to pull him out of danger.

“The Guns N’ Roses Riverport Riot? Really?” Coulson asked with a twitch at the corner of his lips. “I didn’t think centuries-old Norse deities cared for hair-metal. I always pictured them more of a folk metal type.”

“It seemed like fun at the time,” Loki grinned as he thought back to that night. Why had he and Hermes gone to that concert? Had someone suggested it to Hermes? No, someone had told Loki about that musical group… Who was it? Ah! That young man that he met when they first arrived in that year. What was his name again?

“The music is alright, but Axl Rose is a dick. Funny, though, how this incident occurred only two weeks after that fairy ring appeared in Central Park. Then, at the end of the year, they were gone. Never to be seen again…until earlier this year.”

“So how did you know I would be there today?”

“Truth be told, we didn’t. From the records that we got from the Central Park’s horticultural department, the fairy ring started to rot and wither away around the time of the Riverport Riot. So, we figured we had a window of about two to three weeks from the time that the fairy ring came in full bloom. We’ve had agents posted around the clock for the past five days.”

“Just standing there waiting?”

“Yes.”

“And your government pays you for this?”

“Normally I would agree with your waste of tax payer dollars, but when meeting with an invading extraterrestrial, there should be no monetary value.”

“Invading? Who said I was invading?”

“Well, you haven’t given us a valid reason why you’re here otherwise, and you come armed and dressed for battle. You’ll have to forgive us for making assumptions.”

“…So am I your prisoner then?”

“More or less.”

“You know you have no way of holding me here?”
“We have some ways. The last time you were in our custody, you made it a point to show off your sidhar—am I pronouncing that correctly?”

“Seidr.”

“Right, your seidr. You demonstrated it to Howard Stark, who was very much intrigued by it. He spent the last few decades of his life studying your magic and its properties. As it turns out, a lot of your magic contains gamma radiation emission, which would explain why it notes in here that you emit a color signature when you use it.”

“It says that, does it?”

“Right here,” Coulson nodded, “except with bigger, more complicated words. I’m not a physicist.”

“You mentioned that you weren’t a learned man.”

“True, but Howard Stark was. He was a lot of things. And because of his work, and the work of a particular gamma radiation expert, we’ve gotten to better understand how you work… And how to subdue you if necessary.”

“And do you deem it necessary?”

“That depends on your cooperation.”

Although the agent’s voice held a neutral tone, Loki could read the subtle threat. Though Loki knew that he needed to keep a low profile, he could feel himself growing irate at this interrogation. He had not come so far and done so much to exchange one cage for another. These mortals claim to understand his seidr and how he works, but this race was one of the most primitive in all of the Nine, even in this current century. All Loki had to do was flick his wrist, and the whole room could be engulfed in ice or flame. Just a thought, and Loki could be halfway across the world. This mortal knew nothing, and if he kept claiming that he did, well, Loki was ready to show the extent of his power.

Because he wouldn’t stop on his quest for revenge. He couldn’t.

Before Loki could do anything drastic, a door opened up. It took Loki a moment to process what he was seeing, and when he did, all coherent thought abandoned him.

“I don’t think Mr. Laufeyjarson will give you any trouble, Agent Coulson.”

“I’m not so sure,” the agent replied, never taking his eyes off of Loki.

“Why don’t you let me take over for a minute? Mr. Laufeyjarson and I have a good rapport, I’m sure we’ll be alright. If that is alright with you, Loki?”

It took Loki’s mind a moment to catch up with the situation. After all, it is not every day that you find yourself talking to a dead man outside of Helheim. As those honest blue eyes stared down at him, though, Loki couldn’t form a sentence. Instead he nodded a quiet yes. The captain smiled softly down at him and turned back to the Son of Coul.

“If it’s alright with you, Phil, I’ll take over from here.”

“He’s all yours, Captain,” the agent said. He stood, nodded his head towards Loki and then casually left the room, leaving Loki alone and gaping at Captain Steve Rogers.
For the first few minutes, neither of them said a word to each other. Loki was openly staring at the other man, trying to puzzle out what sort of trick this was. The captain’s time was so long ago and the lifespan of the Midgardians was comparable to a fly. This man should either be ancient or dead. By all accounts, he should have died long ago in his battles. How was he here?

Steve grew uncomfortable under Loki’s gaze after the first few seconds. He was getting tired of that look from everyone. That look of amazement, wonder, confusion. That wondering how the hell Captain America was alive after all this time. If Steve didn’t know the answer to that question, how the hell was he supposed to answer it for anyone else? He didn’t know, and it partially became the reason that he chose to avoid people altogether, despite Fury’s attempts to put him back in the real world.

So why was he here now? Well, maybe because it was nice to finally see a familiar face, even if it was the face of a boy he barely knew.

“So…Loki,” Steve finally broke the silence. “You look…different.”

“And you don’t,” Loki finally found his voice. “You look exactly the same as you did when I left. How in Hel’s name is that possible?”

“It’s uh… it’s kind of a long story,” Steve answered, rubbing the back of his neck. He could feel that his hand was trembling again.

“When I went back to Asgard, I was sure that you would have died,” Loki said bluntly. “I kind of did,” he laughed. “That’s part of the long story.”

“A- are the other ones here too? The Colonel, that insufferable Stark man, or Lady Peggy?”

“No,” he sighed. “No, they’re not here. Right now it’s just you and me… And whoever it is listening in on our conversations outside.”

Loki said nothing, but nodded in understanding. Whatever happened with the captain was most definitely not something that he wished to talk about, and Loki actually respected the mortal enough not to push the topic.

Steve nodded in return and moved to sit down. Instead of taking Coulson’s place, Loki watched as Steve gripped the metal chair with his bandaged hand and moved it to the edge of the table. He sat down next to Loki at an angle so that he was facing the prince, but also keeping the door in his peripheral vision. Something in Loki’s expression must have given away his confusion, because the captain looked to the door, back to him and gave a forced laugh.

“Always good to know where the exits are,” he said by way of explaining. “You never know when you need to get out in a hurry.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

They fell into an awkward silence again. A million questions were rushing through Loki’s mind all at once, and he didn’t know where in the world he should begin. Steve, for his part, distracted himself by looking down at the photos that Coulson had left behind. He studied each picture of Loki throughout time, smirking softly to himself every now and again.

“So, who is the person here with you?” Steve asked. He pointed to the hieroglyph picture of Loki standing next to a stylized olive-skinned man with winged feet. “Is he from Asgard too?”
“No,” Loki shook his head. “No, that is my friend, Hermes. He is not from Asgard… I think that you Midgardians are familiar with him.”

“Yeah,” Steve laughed, “if my classical art and history classes are anything to go by. So, Greek deities are real too? You know, I was raised Irish Catholic. You’d think this would upset me more than it does.”

The captain laughed again, but Loki did not understand the joke.

“Your friend wasn’t with you last time we met?”

“No… No, the last time you and I met was my first time on this realm. I hadn’t even really known how I got here. Obviously I’ve worked that out since then. How long exactly has it been since we last spoke?”

“Um… they tell me that I was…asleep for about seventy years. You came around a year before that, so seventy-one years. How long for you?”

“Longer. A few centuries longer, actually.”

“Boy, time sure does fly by, doesn’t it?” Loki laughed a little at Steve’s joke.

“That it does,” Loki agreed.

“So…what brings you to Earth, Loki?”

“Why do you all assume that I came here with a specific goal in mind?”

“Well, you’re not exactly denying it either,” the captain noted.

Fair point, Loki thought. He was going to have to tell these mortals something. As they’ve already made abundantly clear, unless Loki played by their rules, then he was going to lose their trust. While it was not something that he necessarily needed, it would help to move about this world inconspicuously until he got what he came for. He needed to find the Tesseract, and the sooner he did, the better. These mortals, while not as clever as they seem to believe, did seem to be intelligent. They were able to track the locations where Loki had entered the realm, but beyond that, they had managed to pinpoint a timeline. It got his attention, to say the least.

Captain Rogers was looking at Loki expectantly, waiting for his answer, though his eyes were still shifting to the exit. The captain was a good man, Loki remembered. He was brave, honest, and did not care for bullies. More than that, though, he would sacrifice his own life to protect an innocent. He had already proved that to Loki once before. And though the captain now had trembling hands, a haunted look in his eyes and a tense smile, Loki wanted to believe that he was still the same man.

This realm may have changed from the time when Loki first met him, but the captain was now a man somehow out of time. Perhaps he carried his traditional values with him?

Loki dropped his shoulders and looked down at the table, away from the captain’s glance. He let out a few shaky breaths as he felt a couple of tears begin to well in his eyes. He heard the chair next to him scrape against the floor as the captain scooted closer to him. From the corner of his eye, he could see that the man had a hand raised, but instead of putting it on his shoulder, he held it in the air, unsure as to whether or not he should touch.

Very lowly, Loki let out a whisper, “I got away.”

“Loki?”
“I got away,” he repeated a little louder. He kept his head down, though, as he felt his cheeks begin to flush. “From Asgard, from Odin, from…him. I finally got away.”

“I don’t understand.”

“W-when we last met I told you about…what they had planned for me in Asgard. H-how I was betrothed to their crown prince, and h-how cruel they were to me. After I went back that last time, I found that the way I came had a special power… They did not notice I was gone. Somehow, the way I came to this realm let me go through time and… I can’t really explain it all.

“When I found that it was a way for me to travel, though, my friend and I would sneak away for a time to see the different realms. We liked coming to this one a lot through the different ages, as you can see.”

“But you always went back?”

“Yes, I did,” Loki nodded. He had to wonder, though, why did he always go back?

“Are you going to go back this time?”

“No!” Loki nearly shouted. As he shook his head vehemently, he felt a few stray tears fall. He chose at that moment to look up at the captain, eyes red and shining. The captain stared back at him in shock.

“I cannot go back. I will not go back!”

“Loki, what happened?”

“…When we were traveling, Hermes and I found something a-and…I learned that everything I was ever told was a lie. O-Odin had murdered my father and brothers. He ripped me from my dam’s arms moments after my birth so that they could… He wanted control, complete control, and he was going to use me to get it.

“I made my escape during Thor’s coronation. I had to! Once he was crowned king, we would have been married, and I would have had to have his spawn growing inside of me! I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t!”

Loki’s voice was near hysterical at that point with the tears flowing freely from his eyes. Within a second of catching his gaze, the captain took Loki in his arms, wrapping his arms tight around him and pulling the prince against his chest. That was the thing Steve Rogers, he was always a man of action. He may not always know exactly the right thing to say, but when the situation called for it, he was the first man to act. That’s what caught Dr. Erskine’s attention, after all. So while he may not have known what to say to comfort Loki—because, Jesus, this was out of his level—he knew that he had to do something.

Loki accepted the other man’s embrace and allowed the captain to hold him tightly. He was strong, Loki thought. Not as strong as an Aesir, but definitely beyond the realm of any other mortal he’d ever encountered. He may make a useful ally, should the occasion ever call for it.

“I can’t go back,” Loki said over and over again. “I can’t. I was trapped there for so long, and I can’t have him touching me again. Not after the things he made me do… I can’t lie with him and have his child growing in me! I can’t go back!”

“Loki, it’s ok,” Steve shushed. “It’s alright, no one is sending you back.”
“I will do anything that you mortals want,” he swore. “I will be your prisoner for the remainder of my days if that is what you want, but please don’t make me go back.”

“We’re not sending you back, Loki,” Steve said again. “It’s alright. You don’t have to go back. You can stay here, and we’ll do our best to keep you safe.”

Loki turned in the captain’s arms so that he could return the embrace. The new position also turned his face away from the glass where he knew that other mortals were looking on. They couldn’t see his smile now.

***

From outside the room, Director Nicholas Fury was watching the scene with great interest, trying his damnest to read through the bullshit. On his left stood Agent Coulson, on his right were his second-in-command, Maria Hill, and the only person he would trust with the god of lies, Natasha Romanoff. All of them stood there, watching with blank faces as Captain America hugged a crying Norse deity. And Fury thought that it was going to be a boring day at the office.

“What do you make of him?” Fury asked no one in particular.

“He’s hiding something,” Coulson answered. “That much was obvious.”

“He’s right,” Romanoff agreed. “He’s not out-right lying to anyone, but he’s not telling the whole truth either. He’s evading questions and, at the moment, trying to gain sympathy. It’s a good tactic.”

“How much of what he’s saying now can we trust?” Hill asked. “Not to be a downer, sir, but he is known as a trickster god.”

“By the same people who also wrote down that he was a red-head who gave birth to an eight-legged horse,” Fury said. “So perhaps we shouldn’t take the legends down as fact. What is a fact is that he’s here now.”

“Sir, if you’d like me to try, I think I can get more out of him than Captain Rogers,” Romanoff suggested.

“He seems to be responding well to Rogers at the moment. We’ll let them keep talking.”

“With all due respect, sir, Captain Rogers may be too emotionally invested in the situation.”

“Agent Romanoff, are you suggesting that Rogers will allow for sentiment to cloud his judgment?”

“Not in so many words, sir, but I believe that it is an issue at the moment. This is the first voluntary contact that Rogers has made in weeks with someone outside of SHIELD. The fact that it is someone from his past could cause Rogers to become emotionally compromised.”

“Give the captain some credit,” Coulson said. “After all, he only met him once. Besides, Loki doesn’t seem to be the kind that brings up a lot of emotion in people.”

“He’s certainly bringing out a protective instinct in Rogers, though,” Hill noted.

“What do you make of this supposed great escape of his?” Fury asked.

“It was written in Director Carter’s files that Loki gave basically the same story. Came to Earth, but didn’t know how; claimed to be a political prisoner of Asgard and engaged to their crown prince;
also claimed abuse. Then he disappeared and was never directly heard from until today,” Hill said.

“Any way we can have her down here to verify?” Romanoff asked.

“Can’t. She was diagnosed with moderate Alzheimer’s Disease five years ago. She’s currently under intensive care in Brooklyn, but I don’t think she’ll be able to give any help.”

“Ok.” Fury sighed. “So, at the moment we have an extraterrestrial political prisoner now seeking asylum on Earth. What do we know about the place he supposedly escaped from?”

“Asgard? Not much,” Coulson answered honestly. “Aside from old legends and fables, there isn’t much that we can gather. Not even HYDRA’s old files carried much information. Given the strength of radiation and energy from the Tesseract, though, we’re going to have to assume that they are a more advanced race, with greater strength, technology, and power than we can ever dream of having.”

“Peachy.”

“There’s always the possibility that Loki is a scout for Asgard,” Romanoff suggested. “It would explain why he’s popped up in various time periods and never stayed more than a year.”

“Possible, but if he were looking for weak spots, I think he would have struck long before now,” Coulson said.

“Unless this was just another scouting mission and we just happened to be in the right place at the right time?” Hill said.

Before anyone could throw out any more suggestions, they all saw Rogers let go of Loki and pull back from the table. The foreign prince curled back in on himself and kept his head down as Rogers got up and exited the room.

“Captain,” Fury nodded to him.

“Director Fury,” Steve returned, “I take it that you all overheard everything in there?”

“We did. I’m curious as to what you make of the situation.”

“Well… I can’t speak for everyone, but I think the solution is obvious. We can’t send him back to wherever he came from.”

“And why not?”

“You heard him in there, sir. He can’t go back, not with what they’re planning to do with him.”

“Foreign policies of other nations—let alone other planets—are not under SHIELD jurisdiction, Captain Rogers.”

“I understand that, sir, but—”

“Furthermore, if he is in fact a political prisoner, then whoever he escaped from will no doubt be missing him soon. Eventually they will find how he came to be here, and I personally don’t feel like endangering the life of every person on this planet by courting war for harboring one fugitive.”

“Director Fury!” Steve snapped. “With all due respect, sir, I have been reading up on a few of the things that I missed while I was away, including a few things that I missed around my time. During the war… people didn’t know what was happening to innocent people in Europe. Hell, I didn’t
“I’ve also read up on some of the policies that we’ve instated after I went away. The Right of Asylum seeks to protect those who flee from persecution in their home country based on their race, religion, nationality, or social group... From everything that he’s told us, Loki qualifies for asylum. We can’t deny it to him.”

“As shocking as it is, though, Captain Rogers, the United States of America does not speak for the welfare of the rest of the globe. There are other people to consider here.”

“He’s here now, though. It’s our duty to protect him.”

“And if his people come looking for him?”

“That’s still a big ‘if’, sir. From what Loki has said, he didn’t even know how he got here at first, and only one other person knows how he did. Whoever may be looking for him might never find out how he left or where he went, sir... I can’t send him back there.

“I understand that it is a risk, but I am personally willing to accept it. He’s more than willing to work with us and stay under the radar. I’m willing to take full responsibility for him if need be and —”

Alright,” Fury cut him off.

“Alright?”

“Alright, he can stay. For now. But there will be conditions. First, if he even looks at anyone in a manner I don’t like, he gets sent back. Second, he stays chaperoned by either you or a member of SHIELD at all times. Lastly, if and when his people come knocking at our door, guns ready, to take him back, I will not hesitate to hand him over. I don’t care how insensitive that makes me sound, but as I said before, I will not potentially sacrifice the life of every man, woman, and child on this earth for the sake of one person. Is that understood, Captain?”

“...Understood,” Steve nodded.

“Agent Romanoff, kindly escort Captain Rogers and our guest to the dormitories. He’ll stay on base until further notice. You’re welcome to stay as well, if you’d like Captain. Agent Romanoff will be sure to find room for you.”
“Right away, sir,” Romanoff nodded. “Captain Rogers, if you’ll follow me.”

Natasha led the captain back to the interrogation room to gather Loki. There was talk that if they behaved then she would get pizza and show them how to work the Xbox. To be honest, Fury was almost tempted to see that. Almost.

As soon as they were out of sight, he turned back to Hill and Coulson, both of whom were wearing a questioning look.

“Did the captain appeal to your sense of humanity, sir?” Hill asked.

“You could say that.”

“So we’re going to trust Loki then?”

“Not as far as I can throw him,” Fury laughed. “But if he’s willing to work with us, then we can have him around for a while. We still don’t know what he’s capable of, and until we do, I’d rather not test him. Besides, this also gets Rogers back into the world of the living and possibly back on our side.”

“If whoever he’s running from come looking for him, though?” Coulson asked.

“Then I stand by my statement and am more than willing to hand him over peacefully.”

“Sir, there is also the other matter that we haven’t addressed yet,” Hill began. She cut herself off, though, as the interrogation room door opened again.

Romanoff nodded at her three superiors as she walked past, leading the Captain and Loki. Rogers had an arm wrapped protectively around Loki’s shoulder, not holding him close, but making sure to keep the contact. He kept his eyes trained on Fury, Hill and Coulson, almost wary of them as if they were going to snatch Loki out of his grasp. Loki was walking with small steps, head tilted down, shoulders hunched, and green eyes only briefly peeking up at them. It was an odd contradiction to the armor he wore and his former smugness. He looked vulnerable and almost scared, wrapped in his protective leather and Steve Rogers.

Fury kept his eye on him as the three went down the hall and eventually out of sight. He was hiding something, alright. And Fury was damn determined to find out what that was before this was all over.

“The Tesseract is still acting volatile, I take it?” Fury asked, resuming their conversation.

“Increasingly so,” Hill nodded. “We received contact from Dr. Selvig two hours ago that the Project PEGASUS facility had to be evacuated. Everyone got out, and they took everything they could, but a lot of information was lost. Selvig managed to contain the Tesseract and he’s en route with it as we speak.”

“What makes him think it will be any safer here?”

“He doesn’t think that, sir, but you do have to admit that it is odd that the Tesseract stopped being dormant as soon as these mushrooms began to appear in the park. Looking through the records that Agent Coulson compiled about Loki’s former visits, the only other times the Tesseract has reacted has corresponded with the timeline. Today when he shows up it nearly leveled the facility.”

“So he may have something to do with it?”
“Directly or not, sir, I can’t say for sure, but we shouldn’t eliminate the possibility. Being that he’s from the Tesseract’s place of origin, though, he may be useful in better understanding its source and function.”

“Alright,” Fury nodded. “We’ll give him time, see what he can tell us about it, but I don’t want him knowing where it is, let alone in the same room with it. I also think that it’s time to call in the big guns to assist Selvig.”

“Do you mean the big guys, sir?” Coulson asked.

“I do.”

“I’ll be on the first flight to India to retrieve Banner,” Hill said quickly. She nodded to Fury and Coulson before quickly turning on her heels and leaving before Coulson could protest.

“Agent Coulson, I guess that leaves you with the Consultant.”

“I am overwhelmed with joy at the prospect, sir.”

“I have no doubt. You’re in luck, though. He’s in New York now on his new green energy tower project.”

“How is that lucky, sir?”

“It means only an hour in the helicopter rather than five in economy class to Malibu. You’ll be back in time to catch a late show with Audrey.”

“She actually went back to Portland,” Coulson said. “She got second chair in the symphony there. We’re going to try to make it work, though.”

“Phil, you’re stalling.”

“With good reason, sir.”

***

At the top floor of the highest tower in the city that never sleeps, the world’s most famous genius, billionaire, playboy, and philanthropist was currently busy tackling his latest challenge: remodeling the tower’s kitchen.

“Pepper, put those swatches away, or God help me, I will chuck you from the tower,” Tony grumbled, running his hands through his short hair until it stuck out at various ends.

“JARVIS, how thick are these windows?” Pepper asked, not even bothering to look up as she set out the color swatches on the coffee table.

“Miss Potts, each window is a thick five centimeters each and capable of withstanding gunfire. It is doubtful that Mr. Stark has both the strength and energy required to throw you with the proper force required to shatter these windows.”

“Thank you, JARVIS,” the red head smiled smugly. “Now sit down and pick something, Tony.”

“I will get the suit!”

“Rather than attempt to compensate, sir, I suggest that you follow Miss Potts’ instructions and select a color for the kitchen.”
“Really, JARV? You’re taking her side over mine?”

“Miss Potts is more pleasant company, sir.”

“I’m the one that built you! And so help me I can delete you just like that,” he said with a snap of his fingers.

“I’m shaking in my hard drive.”

“Why did I program you with sarcasm?”

“If you two are done bickering like an old married couple, Tony, then can we please get back to the job at hand? The painters are coming in tomorrow afternoon and you need to make a decision.”

“You’ll have to forgive me, Pep, if I don’t find choosing between five shades of white to be the most thrilling use of my time.”

“Well, not everything can be about mechanical suits and arc reactors. Besides, you need time out of your workshop.”

“What’s wrong with my shop? Some of the best things in life have come out of my shop. Isn’t that right, JARVIS?”

“I am a testament to the achievement of mankind, sir.”

“You see.”

“Regardless, the interview for Architectural Digest is in three weeks and you still have the kitchen, two rooms on the third floor, and five on the sixth floor to finish.”

“You see, I’m still not sure why we have to go through all of that bull.”

“You’re a public figure, Tony. People want to see how you live. It actually makes you seem more human to some people.”

“Bruce Wayne didn’t have to go through all of this hoopla when he rebuilt his family estate,” Tony retaliated, crossing his arms like the petulant child he was.

“Bruce Wayne isn’t a superhero, Tony. He also didn’t send out a press release declaring Wayne Manor to be the first ever self-sustaining building in the world and the prototype to clean energy,” Pepper shot back.

“You’ve already got the tower running on the arc reactor. That’s great. Amazing even. However, as depressing as it is, the shareholders and investors won’t be interested unless the tower looks as good as the image you’re trying to sell. Now, I’ve taken off my own time running your company to help you get this place into shape. So you are going to sit down, look through these seventy different shades of white, decide on a style, and pick out appliances, or so help me, not even your suits will protect you!”

Tony hadn’t heard Pepper take that tone of voice with him since he’d nearly killed himself at the Grand Prix in Monaco. Though the stubborn nature that was himself wanted to keep up this fight so that he could finally get back to his shop, the more rational part of himself knew when it was time to throw in the towel. Rolling his eyes, he groaned and plopped down on his sofa. A cloud of sawdust wafted into the air as he sat, a result from the carpenters finishing up the bar in the living room the day before. He was definitely going to have to get a cleaner in there soon. Or maybe just
buy a new sofa.

“Why exactly do I let you into my home again?”

“You couldn’t keep me out if you tried, Tony. Now,” she turned the binder of color swatches in his direction and pointed to the selections. “Make a decision.”

Tony obeyed and began to flip through the binder. Let’s see… There was ghost white, baby powder, cream, snow, ivory, seashell, eggshell, champagne, vanilla, and more fucking white. After the sixth page, Tony closed the binder and pushed it back to Pepper.

“I hate all of these. JARV, just put down for a modern design, expansive and galley layout. Flat-panel cabinet designs in hot rod red, because fuck this eggshell nonsense. Grey quartz for the counters, black stone slab for the backsplash, and black marble tiles for the floor. Integrated sink and all appliances either black or red.”

“Duly noted, sir.”

For a moment, Pepper just stared at him. Her calm demeanor held, hiding her minor shock. Tony returned her gaze with a raised eyebrow, challenging her to say something. Eventually, she couldn’t help but laugh.

“Was that so hard?”

“Yes, it was very painful. I’m going to be carrying these scars for life.”

“Well, before you start licking your wounds, call upon your HGTV knowledge again and make a decision on what you’re going to do with the remainder of these rooms.”

“Fuck,” he groaned and rubbed his hands over his face. Always the drama queen.

Was it really too much to ask to be left alone in peace so that he could tinker in his shop? There was a reason he had given Pepper the company, after all. So that he wouldn’t have to do this type of time-consuming bullshit anymore. Instead of sitting through marketing campaign meetings, though, now he was forced to play designer, and fuck, why the hell didn’t he just hire somebody to come in and do this?

Oh, right. He hated having other people in his home, seeing where he worked and going through his things. Very few people were allowed into his circle of trust and were granted entry into his home. Pepper was at the top of the list, because, as she said, he couldn’t keep her out if he tried. Her tenacity was the reason he took her on as an assistant, after all. Rhodey was another one because, well, if you couldn’t trust Colonel James Rhodes, then you couldn’t trust anyone else in this world. There was another one that Tony had once had in his trust circle, but considering the way that ended in bullets and bloodshed, well… it just caused Tony to tighten the circle.

Now he was being forced by Pepper to open up his home to complete strangers for a day, so they could poke and prod at his creation. Tony didn’t like it. He liked being in the public eye, of course, but only on his own terms. Stark Expo, charity benefit, fashion show in Milan, open a Kmart in Huston, he’s there. He’s the life of the party. Put these nosy strangers near his creations, though, and Tony Stark is the biggest brat alive.

“JARVIS, any chance I can convince Pep to let the remaining rooms be where I keep my porn stash?”

“Highly unlikely, sir. Your current collection all resides in computer format which I have the...
unfortunate task of storing. Might I suggest converting several of the rooms into spare bedrooms, a movie theater, or perhaps even a gift wrapping room?”

“A gift wrapping room sounds nice, actually,” Pepper smiled. “I never buy enough supplies around the holidays, and afterwards I just lose them in my closets.”

“You’re not getting a gift wrapping room,” Tony huffed. “You don’t even live here full time.”

“But when I do stay here, I wouldn’t mind having a place to wrap gifts. Good idea, JARVIS. That settles one room. The movie theater idea is good as well, so what we can do is knock out a wall between two of the rooms to combine and give more space. Oh, and you’ll need a place for a library as well.”

“Why a library? Most of my books are just for show.”

“Because every billion dollar home is expected to have a library. JARVIS, can you please pull up the hologram design of the third and sixth floor layouts?”

“Of course, Miss Potts.”

“I told you that you didn’t need me for this,” Tony huffed. “I’m gonna go back to my shop.”

As Tony made to stand, Pepper’s arm shot out and grabbed hold of the sleeve of his shirt, keeping him in place. Amazing that she had the strength to hold him back like that while she was also busy with the other hand knocking down hologram walls. Tony knew defeat when it smacked him in the face, so he let his legs go limp and fell back down onto the couch. More sawdust wafted into the air. Jesus, he was going to have to kill those carpenters. Or at least make them pay the bill to clean this place. He made a mental note to ask Pepper about it once she was done redesigning his home.

“I hate to interrupt Miss Potts, but there appears to be an agent of SHIELD requesting entrance.”

“I’m not home, JARV. Have him leave a message.”

“He claims that it is rather urgent, sir.”

“Then have him leave it urgently.”

“Sir, Agent Coulson is overriding my programming and entering the elevator. He will be here in thirty seconds.”

“What!” Tony jumped up from the couch. “Security breach! JARVIS, lock it down!”

“Please don’t make this any more difficult than it has to be, sir. His words, not mine.”

“That’s it, SHIELD is getting a virus first thing tomorrow morning. JARVIS, pick out the most annoying and catchy song you can find and have it designed to play on an endless loop.”

“Verka Serduchka’s ‘Dancing Lasha Tumbai,’ sir?”

“That’s my boy.”

“Please don’t, Stark. I’ve just managed to get that song out of my head last week. If it comes back again, I will taze you in the testicles and hum it in your ear as you drool on the floor.”

Even Pepper had to jump at the sudden voice of Coulson. Seriously, how did he get up there so quickly? And how did he get into the penthouse without anyone hearing the elevator? Tony was
left wondering, while Pepper was willing to excuse it on his SHIELD training. Instead, she smiled, got up from the couch and went to greet the agent.

“Phil, it’s so good to see you again,” she smiled warmly and held out her hand.

“You as well, Miss Potts.” Coulson took her hand in his and gave it a friendly shake.

“Phil?” Tony repeated. “Excuse me, but his first name is ‘Agent.’”

“Only when I’m on the clock, which, lucky for you, Stark, I am.”

“To what do we owe the pleasure, Phil?” Pepper asked.

“Pleasure? Uh, no. Pleasure is the feeling I get when I driving with the top down on my new Porsche. Pleasure is that warm, tingly feeling you get when you sip through a bottle of thirty year old Scotch. A SHIELD lackey invading my home is not pleasure. It makes me feel all dirty and violated.”

“Is he done?” Coulson asked Pepper.

“Not likely.”

“Standing right here,” Tony said, waving his hand in front them. “Say what you need to say, Coulson, and then be on your way. If this is about the suits again, then you can just go ahead and hit the door.”

“Relax, Stark, this isn’t about your suits or your reactor. We already collected enough information on those from Agent Romanoff.”

“Is that her real name? How is Natalie doing anyway?”

“No it’s not, and no, she has not asked about you.”

“I didn’t say anything—”

“We’re going to need you to come in, Stark.”

“You’re going to need me to what now?”

“Is this about the Avengers,” Pepper asked before quickly adding, “which I know nothing about.”

“Nah, the Avengers Initiative was scrapped. Plus, I didn’t even qualify for it.”

“I didn’t know that either.”

“According to Fury, I’m—what was it?—volatile, self-obsessed, and don’t play well with others.”

“Now that I did know.”

“This isn’t about the Avengers Initiative,” Coulson said. He took a touch pad out from his jacket and tried to hand it to Tony, but the engineer put his hands up and took a step back.

“Yeah, I don’t really like to be handed things.”

“Give it to me,” Pepper said. She took the pad from Coulson and forced it into Tony’s hand.

“Thank you,” Coulson nodded to her. “Have either of you heard on the news about the earthquake
in New Mexico early this morning.”

“I think I heard something about it on the news this morning. I thought it was only a magnitude three. The news didn’t say anyone was hurt or killed,” Pepper said.

“No one was hurt, but it wasn’t an earthquake. Stark, start looking through the files in that pad and be ready to be at SHIELD headquarters by sundown.”

“Are you going to tell me what this is about?”

“Everything you need to know is in that pad, Stark.”

“Yes, but I’d like to know exactly what the hell you’re trying to drag me into before SHIELD tries to keep me on a leash.”

“We have no intention of using you or your suits, Stark. We actually need your expertise for an energy crisis.”

“Energy crisis?”

“Something like that, anyway. Your father was the first one to discover it, and some of his old notes are on file in there.”

“Stuff from my old man, huh?” Tony laughed. “Well, even in death he just keeps on giving, doesn’t he? Gonna have to pass on this, Agent.”

“Not an option.”

“Of course it is. Besides, Pepper has me tied down to the tower right now. I still have to pick out wall paper, furniture, gift wrapping accessories, you know how it goes. Sorry, just can’t get out of it.”

“Actually, Tony, I think JARVIS and I can handle it from here.”

“…You’re the devil. Did you know that?”

“Start packing, Stark, and be ready to leave within the hour.”

“Not gonna—”

“Mr. Stark, your snappy, do whatever I please, attitude may work on the media, but it won’t work on me. Now you have two options. Either you can pack whatever you need and meet me at the end of the hour. Or I can take you back to SHIELD headquarters with enough tranquilizers in your system to take down a bull elephant. Your choice.”

“Exactly how long do the tranquilizers last?”

“Tony!” Pepper snapped.

“Alright,” he groaned, rolling his eyes. “JARVIS, put the shop and all MK armor designs on full lock-down. No one gets in, not even Pepper. Oh, and have the emergency case ready to go in five minutes.”

“Of course. Will you be requiring Blue Steel or Hot Rod?”

“No need for the show, JARVIS. We’ll stick with the MK XLII.”
Tony rolled his eyes, but still managed a smirk at his AI’s tone of voice. Which was a weird thought in itself. From behind him he could hear Pepper and Coulson chatting away like old friends and decided to leave them be. Lord knows Pepper could use a friend outside of Tony Stark and his chaotic world. He loved Pepper, and she loved him, but his self-obsessed and risk-taking nature would always hold them back from ever taking their friendship to another level. Tony wouldn’t want to anyway. He was too much for someone as good as Pepper. The woman had the patience of a saint and she deserved so much better than Tony Stark. He didn’t need to be the center of her whole world.

Tony shook those thoughts from his head and made a beeline for his room, where his private elevator was. It was gracious of Coulson to give him an hour to pack, but all Tony really needed was about ten minutes to throw five shirts and a toothbrush into a suitcase. Before he left, he wanted to get a few things from his workshop. On the elevator ride down, though, he began looking through the files on the touch pad—old, outdated thing that it was. He should really donate some of the old Starkpads to SHIELD to get them up to date with the technology. Seriously, his phone could hold more data than this thing.

As he looked through the files, though, his curiosity was piqued when he saw pictures—new and old—of a glowing blue cube. There was also some kind of weird terminology written next to it, something that Tony had never seen in relation to physics.

“What the hell is sidhar?”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for taking so long!

Coming up, we'll have some Science Bros! Loki gets acquainted with Midgardian hospitality. And we'll top it all of with a nice Frostiron reunion.

Stay tuned!
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

So the past month has been nothing but packing boxes and job interviews. I've worked on this when I could, but it's not all I wanted it to be. Mostly character background and attempts at character development. Hopefully you will enjoy it.

There are some trigger warnings for this chapter. A mention of an attempted act of extreme violence (bombing). If this is a trigger for you, then be aware that it is in here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Even though the room they had been put in had no windows, Steve was up with the crack of dawn. An old habit from his war days that apparently didn’t fade away after his seventy year nap. The room they were in was small, only enough space for a bunk bed, one chest and a television that hung on the wall. Agent Romanoff had meant for this room to just be Loki’s. She had planned to have the captain set up in one of the larger dormitories, one that provided more amenities, but Steve hadn’t trusted the offer. He may have been out of the game for a while, but he knew how government officials like this operated. While Steve knew that they were probably being watched even now, he wasn’t sure if Loki was aware of their surveillance methods. Loki was Steve’s responsibility now. He didn’t want to leave him vulnerable.

Loki was still sleeping soundly in the lower bunk. He was curled up in a fetal position with the thin, scratchy blanket tucked up to his chin. Steve had to smirk at the way Loki swaddled himself in his sleep. He may have seemed guarded and tough initially, but he looked almost innocent this way. Steve didn’t want to wake him yet or leave him alone in an unfamiliar place, so he kept himself busy by trying to exercise. He laid down on the floor and began doing sit up, making sure that he was facing the room’s only door the whole time.

Steve liked the monotonous workout routine in the morning. Ever since he woke up, he’s found that it’s one of the few things that he can do to keep his mind free, except, of course, when he’s using the punching bag. Those moments only come when he needs some way to vent his frustration. Yesterday’s bout in the gym had come after he had foolishly decided to look over the files that Fury had given him a week after he woke up from the ice. They were the files on Colonel Phillips, Howard Stark, the Howling Commandos…and Peggy. It had taken Steve two months to finally work up the courage to actually look at them.

The colonel had survived the war. It was written in the files that he, Stark, and Peggy had gone on to become the original founders of SHIELD. Steve had to laugh at that. He had died at his home in 1963.

Howard had gone on and turned his company Stark Industries into a multi-billion dollar corporation that dealt in weapons and technology. Steve was surprised to learn that he had actually gotten married, given his past ways. He had a son, too. Steve had heard of his name in passing on news programs, but decided not to follow up on it. Howard may have been difficult, but he was his friend too. He couldn’t bring himself to look at the man’s son and not feel the sting of the past. Howard and his wife, Maria, had died in a car crash in 1988.

Cancer took Jacques Dernier in the mid-1980s. Jim Morita’s helicopter was shot down in North Vietnam in 1970. James Falsworth had a stroke in 2002 and never fully recovered before he passed away two years later.

All of his friends, gone. He was the only one left.

Well, that wasn’t true. Peggy’s file was the only one without the bright red ink reading deceased. Steve still couldn’t bring himself to open the file.

Instead, Steve focused on the here and now. The burn of his body as he tried to push himself to his near impossible limit. He wondered sometimes how far he would have to run before his lungs finally gave out. Or how many of these sit-ups or push-ups he would have to do before he felt his muscles tearing. How long would it take before Captain America’s body was finally as broken and exhausted as his mind?

Steve got to his 103rd push-up when he heard the stirring of his bunkmate next to him. He stopped his workout, chest lightly panting, as he watched Loki begin to wake up. The prince tossed and turned a bit in the bed until he rolled onto his back. His hair, which had been sleek and pulled back from his face the day before, was a tangled, fluffy mess, sticking out in various directions and sticking slightly to the sweat on his cheek. Slowly, he began to open his eyes, blinking quickly to get rid of the haze in his vision. Steve watched closely as Loki’s body stiffened slightly, probably from lack of awareness of his surroundings. Steve had had mornings like that since waking up. Opening your eyes in an unfamiliar place can leave a man feeling panicked and threatened. Loki was quick to relax, though, as he let out a loud yawn and stretched his arms over his head. It was kind of cute, actually.

Loki slowly sat up in the bed and rubbed his eyes before he looked over to Steve. He gave the captain a small smile.

“Good morning, Loki,” Steve greeted.

“Morning,” Loki mumbled. “What time is it?”

“Last I checked it was a bit after eight in the morning. Did I wake you up too early?”

“Norns, no,” Loki smiled. “I haven’t slept in this late in quite some time. Probably not since the last time I was on this realm. Usually by now the maids would have woken me, bathed me, and dressed me.”

“They actually bathe you?”

“Occasionally,” Loki shrugged. “My nurse Hulda used to do it herself, but as I got older, some of the other maids were assigned to the task. Often I think it was just so they could have a peek at the curiosity between my legs. It made for quite the fun gossip in Asgard.”

“You mean the whole…” Steve trailed off and his hand gestured towards Loki’s crotch.

“My dual sex? Yes.” Loki smirked and Steve’s cheeks flushed.

“Yeah… that. Anyway, sorry that we don’t have any royal bathers or dressers, but if you want to get cleaned up, there is a small shower in the bathroom over here,” he pointed to the door leading to the room’s connecting bathroom. “It should have some soap and shampoo. I’m not sure if it has any razors or shaving cream, though.”

“I would have no use for them anyway. Thank you, Captain. I think I will freshen up a bit.
Afterwards, let’s see if our captors will feed us. I’m positively starved.”

“I don’t think they’re our captors, Loki. We’re not technically prisoners.”

“Aren’t we?” Loki asked, raising his eyebrow.

Steve didn’t answer. Loki got up from the bed and walked towards the bathroom. After he had closed the door, Steve called out, “Let me know if you need any help. What we have here may be a bit different than what you’re used to.”

“I am familiar with Midgardian bathing customs, thank you,” Loki called back.

“Suit yourself,” Steve muttered.

One of the things that Steve was still trying to adjust to in this decade was the difference in the showers. Before he enlisted, his meager little apartment had a tiny porcelain tub that he couldn’t stretch his legs out in even back then. There was a faucet and a shower head that ran cold or lukewarm water at a low pressure, but that was about it. In the apartment that Fury set him up in, the bathroom was probably about as big as a studio apartment and the shower head had about five different settings on it. Trying to operate it at first was like trying to fly a space ship for Steve. If the actual alien could get it down with no problem, though, then more power to him.

While Loki was in the shower, Steve preoccupied himself by getting dressed. He’d already brushed his teeth and shaved before Loki got up, so he gave the bathroom a respectful distance. The clothes he wore now were SHIELD issued jogging pants and shirt, complete with the SHIELD emblem above the heart. There were two pairs of the outfit in the room’s chest, so he and Loki had both worn a pair to sleep in. He changed back into his clothes from the day before, slightly surprised that no one had confiscated them while they were sleeping. Well, he was more surprised that they hadn’t confiscated Loki’s apparel.

The prince’s clothes and armor still remained in a neatly folded pile at the edge of the bunk beds. Curious, and with little else to do, Steve began to look through Loki’s clothes, slightly in awe over how much there appeared to be.

The tunic Loki wore underneath his armor was simple enough. A muted green top made from some kind of spun wool, but incredibly durable. The leather trousers were worn and tarnished, as if they had seen a bit of action in Loki’s day, but to hear the prince describe it, he’d been pampered most of his life. The boots he wore were worn and tarnished as well, but interestingly enough, the boots contained straps that connected them to the trousers, making them much more difficult to take off. Steve could only imagine why that was.

Loki’s upper armor was peculiar as well. It was an asymmetrical design of overlapping leather, muted green cloth and metal studs that hung well below his waist when he wore them. The chest plate was made of a tougher material that Steve couldn’t identify, but it was a dark color, with a bronze collar. Over all of that, Loki had a long leather coat with more overlapping metal, leather, and green cloth that stretched down to his wrists. Over the forearms were bronze vambraces with intricate designs that Steve couldn’t recognize, but assumed held significance for Loki. Over the shoulders were hard plates that had made Loki seem wider and broader when he wore them.

His outfit was odd, to say the least. He was wrapped up almost from head to toe, as if he were trying to conceal himself. Made sense, though, Steve thought. It was armor, after all.

His helmet still confused the hell out of him, though. Those horns were just not practical in hand-to-hand combat.
There was a knock at the door and Steve abruptly dropped Loki’s helmet, as if it had burned him. He quickly put it back in its place and went to answer the door. It was no surprise that Natasha was the one on the other side. After bringing them to the room the night before, she had stayed for about two hours, attempting to make small talk with Steve and Loki. The prince only answered her with a “yes” or “no” and Steve wasn’t quite ready to trust her yet. She either got the hint or got what she came for eventually.

“Captain Rogers,” Natasha greeted, stepping over the threshold into the room.

“Agent Romanoff.”

Natasha’s eyes scanned over the room quickly before she asked, “Where’s Laufeyjarson?”

“Loki’s in the shower. I figured that you would already know that.”

“You’re a guest Captain, not a prisoner. You’re not under surveillance.”

“I find that a bit hard to believe.”

Natasha just gave a quiet “Hmm” and sat herself down on the lower bunk of the bed. Neither of them aid anything for a while. Natasha’s eyes just kept scanning around the room, looking for something Steve can’t quite guess. Steve stood where he was, between Natasha and the door, eyes focused on her. From the bathroom they could hear the running of the shower.

“You know you should talk to somebody about that,” Natasha said suddenly.

“About what?”

“The tremor in your hands,” she answered, not looking at him.

Steve’s eyebrow raised curiously, but he did glance down and see that his hands were trembling by his waist. Reflexively, he curled them into a fist and willed the shaking to stop.

“It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“I’m sure you can…but the tremors can be a bitch if you don’t get them under control. It helps to talk to someone.”

“Someone like you?”

“No, I wouldn’t be able to help you,” she answered honestly. “Still, there are support groups out there. It wouldn’t hurt to visit one.”

“Is this a way of trying to get me back out into the world again?”

“No. Just a way to try to help you sleep better at night.”

“I thought you said you weren’t watching me?”

“I’m not.” She turned to look at him. “But it’s pretty obvious… I know a guy who runs one of those groups not too far from here. You should look into it.”

“…Maybe.”

Silence again. Thankfully, though, it was much more short-lived this time. The sound of the running water from the shower had stopped and soon after, the door to the bathroom opened. Loki
stepped through the door surrounded by a cloud of steam from the shower. Aside from a silver pendant around his neck, he was completely naked, with a white towel was slung around his hips while he used another to dry his hair. Though it was nothing he hadn’t seen before, Steve politely looked away to give the man some semblance of privacy. Natasha had no qualms in staring openly at Loki.

For Loki to be an alien, she had expected him to be, well, more alien. She expected him to have an extra arm, gills, black eyes, a third nipple…something. What she was looking at now was sadly underwhelming. Loki appeared normal, human. He had human skin, was built like an athlete, and, as far as Natasha could tell, no slimy tentacles. There was something in the old files about him having a vagina as well as a cock, but she wasn’t curious enough to lift up his towel and find out for herself.

“Lady Natasha,” Loki greeted her with a soft smile. “Lovely to see you again.”

“Mr. Laufeyjarson.”

“Did you find everything you needed, Loki?” Steve asked.

“Yes I did. Thank you.”

“Mr. Laufeyjarson, when you’re ready, we’d like you to come with us to run some tests.”

“What sort of tests?”

“A simple physical. Since you’re going to be with us for a little while, Director Fury wanted to ensure that you’re in good health. We don’t know much about your general immune system, so it’s just a precaution to ensure that you didn’t carry anything from your world that would be harmful to us or vice versa.”

“Can it wait?” Steve asked. “Loki and I were wanting to get some breakfast first.”

“You can go to the dining hall if you’d like, Captain, but Fury’s orders were to get Loki in as soon as possible. He can eat after, if he likes.”

“It is alright, Sir Steve,” Loki told him. “I am a guest on this realm. If your director wants me to obey his orders, then I will. Whatever I can do to show that I am not as hostile as he believes.”

“Then I’m going with him.”

“You don’t have to—” Steve interrupted Natasha before she could finish.

“I don’t feel comfortable leaving Loki alone with anyone he doesn’t know. After what he’s been through I think it’s better if he stays with someone he can trust.”

“Very noble of you,” Natasha said dryly. “Mr. Laufeyjarson, is that alright with you?”

“O- of course,” Loki nodded. His eyes shifted over and caught Steve’s gaze. “I trust the Captain completely.”

“Alright then. Get dressed and we’ll be outside waiting. Don’t wear the full armor. The pants and shirt we’ve provided will be enough.”

Natasha got up from the bed and exited the room without another word. Steve looked back to Loki and gestured awkwardly to the door. “I’ll just uh… Yeah.”
Loki got his meaning and nodded. Steve gave him a reassuring smile and left the room to let him get dressed. Outside the door, Natasha was leaning against the wall with a bored expression on her face.

“So, just a physical?”

“That’s the order.”

“Fury wouldn’t be using this opportunity to poke and prod him like a lab rat, would he?”

“It’s just a physical, Captain. When he does decide to examine Loki more fully and see what makes him tick, we’ll be upfront and honest about it.”

“Good to know that SHIELD is all about honesty.”

“We’re not the enemy here, Captain Rogers.”

“Neither is Loki.”

“That remains to be seen.”

“I don’t know what you see, but all I’ve seen is a scared kid who ran away from a bad situation. He doesn’t deserve to be treated like some kind of spy.”

“Only time will tell, I suppose,” Natasha shrugged.

The silence fell on them again and Natasha’s head fell back against the wall behind her as she let out a heavy sigh of boredom. A particularly violent tremor went through Steve’s arm, making his hand twitch. Though Natasha wasn’t watching him directly, Steve noticed that her eyebrow quirked. He folded his arms over his chest and clenched his fists tightly to make sure that it didn’t happen again.

“It does make me wonder why you’re so willing to put yourself out on a limb for him, but you’re so quick to be suspicious of us, Captain Rogers. Director Fury just wants to help you.”

“Fury wants me to get back to work. I’m not ready for that yet.” He didn’t know that he ever would be again.

“Agent Coulson doesn’t want anything from you. Except maybe an autograph for his card collection.”

“Card collection?”

“His Captain America and the Howling Commandos trading cards. They’re vintage. He’s very proud.”

“I didn’t know we had trading cards.”

“To hear Coulson talk about it, they were pretty popular. He’s also got old comic books and your film.”

“My film?”

Blood instantly rushed to Steve’s cheeks, turning his skin an unflattering red hue. He remembers that movie. An awful publicity stunt done to help with the war effort back home, before he was put into the combat. Steve remembered watching it in the cinema the first time. He had looked so
awkward on camera, marching in place in front of a projector screen or pretending to shoot bullets from a toy gun. The people around him in the theater had enjoyed the show, but he had been mortified with embarrassment.

“Oh yeah,” Natasha laughed. “It’s available on Youtube too. I really liked the part where you punched Hitler in the jaw.”

“Yeah, that one was always a crowd-pleaser,” Steve chuckled.

“I can see why.”

This time Natasha turned her head to look at Steve before giving him a soft smile. Steve surprised himself when he returned it. He still didn’t trust her yet. He didn’t know if he could ever fully trust anyone in this new world, but for a moment at least, the silence between them wasn’t as tense. Steve didn’t even notice when he felt the muscles of his arms begin to relax and the tremors stopped.

The door to the room between them slowly opened and Loki stepped out. Natasha raised a brow in curiosity when she noticed that Loki wasn’t wearing either the clothes SHIELD had given them, nor his armor from the previous day. Instead he had on a long-sleeved, V-neck shirt and black jeans. His hair was combed back away from his face with the ends falling just pass his shoulders.

“I believe I am ready for your inspection, Lady Natasha.”

“Right this way, Mr. Laufeyjarson.”

Natasha turned and began to walk down the hallway, Loki trailing softly behind her. Steve straightened his back and followed as well. Loki was his responsibility. He wasn’t going to leave him alone.

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The facilities that SHIELD provided were far under Tony Stark’s standards. Seriously, it reminded him of the first test lab his dad had given him when he was fourteen. He would compare it to Hammer Industries, but the insult seemed too harsh even for him. To make it worse, as soon as he had arrived, Fury’s lackeys had thrown him into a room with a blue, glowing cube of doom with about ten other lab techs. Tony couldn’t work like this. He needed complete solitude in a lab and all of these people were writing things down on their touch pads, keying away at monitors or trying to hand him things. Tony could barely stand his own company. He was going to lose his mind at any time now.

The only reprieve he found so far was that he was working with astrophysicist Dr. Erik Selvig. The man was a legend in the scientific community, his research on thermonuclear astrophysics unparalleled. Tony had heard that he had recently been slumming somewhere in New Mexico with up-and-coming astrophysicist Jane Foster, researching the possibility of an Einstein-Rosen Bridge. While the whole thing seemed like a big bunch of Doctor Who—wibbly wobbly timey-whimey stuff—fantasy, Tony could see the potential in her work. If she could prove the existence of it, then it would no doubt go down as the greatest discoveries in science.

Too bad for her and Selvig both that SHIELD had gotten their hands on all of their hard work. Now Dr. Foster was who knows the hell where while Selvig was trapped beneath Washington D.C. with a narcissist.

Speaking of Selvig, Tony noticed that the man hadn’t said anything in quite some time. The older
man was mostly keeping himself busy by adjusting the levels on the device holding the glowing cube of doom. When Tony had first come in, the damn thing was randomly shooting off waves of blue colored energy, frying some of the high-tech equipment and burning the skin on one of the SHIELD scientist’s hands. It went on that way for a few hours before Selvig had managed to get the damn thing under control.

“Something has got her worked up,” Selvig had said.

Tony was a little curious as to why Selvig was referring to the glowing blue cube of doom as a woman, but considering the fact that he got into daily arguments with an artificial intelligence system, he wasn’t one to judge.

“Where exactly did this thing come from?” Tony asked.

“You’ve read the file, Stark.” Selvig answered, not looking away from the cube.

“Yeah, I glanced at the paperwork. Kept in Norway for centuries before it was taken by HYDRA for weapons manufacturing—which was highly effective from my understanding. Captain America had a whole, you know, Highlander fight to the death scene over it, because, you know there can be only one genetically modified super-soldier. Then dear ol’ Dad plucked it out of the water like it was the Heart of the Ocean and nothing about it since then. What I want to know is where the thing came from, and why did SHIELD keep this thing low profile until now.”

“That’s not why we’re here,” Selvig sighed, rubbing his forehead with his fingertips. “We’re here to study the Tesseract and find out why the hell, after years of dormancy, it’s reacting so wildly.”

“Yeah, sure,” Tony nodded. “Because that’s what SHIELD is all about. Scientific inquiry for no other reasons than just to satisfy curiosity. Blueberry?” Tony held out his hand to offer his bag of blueberries to Selvig. The older man looked at it curiously, wondering where the hell he had gotten them from. Food wasn’t allowed in the lab.

“No. Thank you.”

Tony shrugged his shoulders and took out another blueberry. “So SHIELD has no intentions to succeed where HYDRA failed?”

“I wouldn’t know, Stark. I’m just here to stabilize the Tesseract and study its potential as a source of energy. Which is why I’m guessing they brought you in as well. After all, from what I’ve heard, Stark Industries is leading the world in clean energy.”

“Very true,” Tony smiled and ate another blueberry.

Yes, Tony was an innovator for clean energy, in these recent years. But he made his name in weapons manufacturing. It’s why he was worth more than Bill Gates, why almost every American ally carried one of his company’s weapon designs, why the Ten Rings held him captive in that cave for all of those months, and why he was now sporting that lovely arc reactor in the center of his chest. Though if he wanted to, he could try to pass it off as an extreme fashion statement. Forking tongues is so 2002.

The thing was that since learning about SHIELD and his dad’s involvement in the organization, Tony realized that the main reason for them to utilize Stark Industries was strictly weapons based. So Fury and Selvig both could go on and on about how their interest in the glowing cube was nothing more than scientific, but Tony Stark did not like to be played. He’d had enough of that for one lifetime.
So it was unfortunate for Fury that he decided to give Tony the full tour before locking him down in the lab. As soon as he was in the main control room, Tony had done his whole alpha male spiel and berated the obsolete technology that SHIELD was using—seriously, he was just embarrassed for them—and left his bug behind. It took JARVIS less than five minutes to get through the firewall and into SHIELD’s mainframe. Now his buddy would give him all of SHIELD’s dirty secrets and Tony could find out what the hell he was really doing here.

“Stark!” Selvig called out. “Put down the blueberries, get over here and make yourself useful.”

“Yes, sir,” Tony mocked saluted and put his bag down.

He walked over to where Selvig was still hunched over his computer monitors and rubbing his temples. “What do you make of these gamma readings?” He asked.

“Well, I only became an astrophysicist last night, so you’ll have to forgive me if I’m wrong, but according to this, this thing has the energy equivalent of a nuclear explosion. Yet somehow we haven’t been vaporized. Lucky us.”

As if on cue, the Tesseract reacted, shooting off sparks of its blue colored energy. “Spoke too soon.”

“She knows you’re talking about her,” Selvig laughed.

“She? I think you’ve been spending too much time down here.”

“I know I have,” he laughed again. “My point is that you see how much energy she contains. Gamma rays have the most energy of any electromagnetic spectrum. The bursts, like the one just now, have more energy than the sun has produced in over ten billion years. The energy contained in the Tesseract is unlimited, and we are now in the position of understanding and utilizing that power.”

“Didn’t peg you for a megalomaniac, Dr. Selvig.” Tony raised a brow skeptically at the crazed, excited look that had come over Selvig.

“I’m not, Stark. I’m looking at the bigger picture. If we could find a way to utilize this energy, fossil fuels would become virtually obsolete. Not to mention the opportunity it will give to understanding supernovas, black holes, compositions of other planets, understanding new physics! Stark, try to forget whatever conspiracy theory you’re cooking up about SHIELD, and focus on the larger picture. This is one of the largest breakthroughs in history. I thought you of all people would be excited.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Dr. Selvig, I’ve got a raging brainer right now, but I’ve always been a more in the moment type of guy.”

“Humor me then. At the moment, what do you think of her?”

“At this moment right now, I think what we’ve got is a highly unstable source of energy that even I have no way of completely understanding. And trust me, Doc, that’s saying something. Believe me, if this were all about just trying to understand the wonders of the universe, I’d be ready to take this thing apart like a puzzle. But at the moment, this is reminding me a little too much of the origins of nuclear fission. And we all remember how that turned out, don’t we?”

“This is hardly the Manhattan Project, Stark.”

“No, this is something bigger.”
Selvig didn't answer. He just gave Tony a resigned look and rubbed his temple again before walking away. Tony shrugged it off and turned away. He was slowly getting used to those looks of disappointment from his colleagues. Well, not from his colleagues per say, but from his former business partners and investors.

Afghanistan had changed Tony, in more ways than just the shards of metal beneath his skin. Beforehand Tony Stark was the archetypal rich-kid turned master-of-the-universe. He took over his father’s company because, despite how much he resented the old man, it was expected of him. It was what he had been groomed for, and damn if he wasn’t good at it. There was one plus side to manufacturing weapons: there was always a client. With other industries there would always be advancing technology that would eventually render a product obsolete. In this world, though, there would always be war, and therefore, Stark Industries would always be in business. Tony could have Pepper write up as many different press releases as she liked about how Tony was proud to be a part of the war effort, supporting his country, and keeping our troops safe, but at the end of the day, he knew it was all a crock of shit. Back then it had nothing to do with helping anyone. Tony wanted to rule the world while he stayed safely locked away in his ivory tower.

Then the day came when he fell from that tower and he saw exactly what it was that his megalomania had done. The contracts he’d had were always strictly intended to benefit his country’s military forces and their allies, but weapons dealings was of course never that easy. An underhand dealing here, a person working off the books there, one person wanting to profit and not caring about the consequences and what was originally meant to protect was now used to destroy. In that cave the Ten Rings took him too, a majority of the weapons that they had came straight from Stark Industries.

It wasn’t Tony’s fault, not directly anyway, but when they took that sack off his head, as he was holding the car battery in his hands—the only thing keeping him alive—and so sure that he was going to die, he had a realization. Everything he had done in his life had lead him to that moment. His desire to rule the world brought him down to that cave. The Merchant of Death is what they called him back then. Tony had laughed at the nickname back then—hell, he’d even used it during press conferences—but it wasn’t until he saw the damage done firsthand that he actually understood how fitting the title was. All of the damage that the Ten Rings had done, all of the lives stolen, it rested on his shoulders.

But then there was Yinsen.

“Don’t waste it...don’t waste your life, Stark.”

The last words of a dying man, of a man who had sacrificed his life so that Tony could have a chance to live. Tony thought about Yinsen every day. And every day he tried to live up to his promise. He wasn’t going to waste his life trying to rule the world anymore, and he certainly wasn’t going to waste his life by creating weapons that would give others the means too.

So while Selvig chose to remain ignorant, Tony wasn’t going to be anyone’s Merchant of Death. And he certainly wasn’t going to be anyone’s puppet. Not again.

There was a sudden beeping noise coming from Tony’s watch. A couple of the lab assistants looked over at Stark curiously and Tony smiled back.

“Time to take my pills,” he said by way of explaining.

“There’s a sink in the restroom off to the left,” one of the passing assistants said.

“Yeah… Thing is Fury only gave me time to drop my shit in my room. He didn’t exactly give me
time to get them out of my bag before he dragged me down here to play Mr. Wizard’s World. I’m gonna need to go back and get them.”

“No one leaves until the authorized time, Stark,” one of the SHIELD lackeys guarding the entrance told him.

“Come on,” Tony groaned. “I will be gone ten minutes top. I’ll be right back and then Fury can keep me down here until I get a Vitamin D deficiency. Or do you want to be the one to tell Fury that you let me keel over because you wouldn’t let me take the medicine keeping me from getting endocarditis? You know, forget Fury, the media would have a hell of a time with that story. Can you picture it? Because I can. Something about how ‘Shady secret government organization allows for billionaire and beloved American icon, Tony Stark, to die.’ Oooh… Nancy Grace would have a field day with that one.”

“Alright, Stark,” the guard said, breaking his stiff, stoic stance with an eye roll. “Agent Bradford will accompany you.”

“No need, I know my own way.”

“It’s procedure, Stark.”

“Procedure or not, I’m not going to be followed around by some strange guy who feels the need to where sunglasses twenty levels underground. My room is one level up, you dicks already took my phone and I have no way of contacting anyone even if I wanted to. What are you so worried about?”

The two guards at the entrance didn’t say anything. Instead they took a moment, looked at each other, and gave a simultaneous nod. Creepy.

“We’ll give you twenty minutes, Stark. If you’re not back by then, we come after you with tasers.”

“What is it with you guys and tazing people?”

“It’s standard procedure.”

“Whatever.”

Tony rolled his eyes and waited as one of the guard—Tony was going to call him Tweedle-Dee—swiped his badge and pressed the key code in. The door slid open and Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum stepped aside. Tony gave them a nod and walked out.

After the door slid close Tony couldn’t see as Tweedle-Dum looked up to the rafters of the room. The silent pair of eyes that had been watching everything unfold locked on to his gaze. Tweedle-Dum gave a nod and the other nodded back. He stood from his perch and made to leave his nest.

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Once Tony was a reasonable distance from the lab, he took a moment to ensure that no one was around. This level of the facility had the highest security clearance, but it was surprisingly very low on the actual number of guards. Tony didn’t know whether that was a good thing or bad. He supposed that he would find out soon enough, though.

There was no one around, but Tony felt the need to duck into a corner anyway as he glanced down at his watch. Fury had done the smart thing by confiscating his cell phone when he entered the base, but what man focuses on someone’s watch as a threat? No one actually does that James Bond
shit. Well, no one but Tony Stark. The watch on his wrist was actually the prototype for the next Stark brand watches—patent pending, but should hit the market by 2017. It functioned as a computer, an emergency phone with accompanying nude earpiece, mp3 player, PDA, and, most importantly, it was connected directly to JARVIS. Oh, and it told time as well.

Tony tapped on the screen a few times to signal to JARVIS that he was finally alone.

“Talk to me, buddy. What have you got?”

“Security cameras have been momentarily scrambled, sir. We have at most a minute and a half before SHIELD has them back online.”

“Then talk fast, JARV.”

“You were right to be skeptical about the Tesseract, sir. SHIELD’s files on the device is the most expansive in their system, from its history to intentions of current use. I’ve copied all relevant records and will upload them to your device shortly. SHIELD has also installed cameras in all dorm rooms, including yours, sir, but systems show that security is lax around three to four in the morning. I would recommend waiting until then before you begin searching through.”

“This is why I love you, buddy.”

“Sir, there is one more piece of information that you may find relevant. It was a subcategory filed along with the Tesseract. It seemed relatively minor, but even I could not get through the firewall surrounding the files.”

“Really now?” Tony was intrigued. “Any idea what it could be?”

“Nothing certain, sir, but I managed to cross-reference what I could find with files on the Tesseract and found that several of the terms overlapped. Seidr was the one that appeared most.”

There was that weird word again. It was all over his dad’s old records, but Tony had no idea what exactly it was and no one was forthcoming with an explanation.

“A timetable shows that the files were reopened within the last twenty-four hours, and Dr. Banner was brought in as a consultant. Security footage showed that he is currently in the base, two levels above you.”

Dr. Banner. Bruce Banner? The Bruce Banner? Tony felt a flutter in his stomach that was akin to the first time he saw Motley Crue in concert and then did blow with Tommy Lee backstage. The feeling of all of his limbs stiffening, but somehow shaking at the same time, while being overcome with the urge to jump, shout, and squeal in a very unmanly fashion. Fangirling is what the kids called it nowadays.

Bruce Banner was a fucking legend in the scientific community. His work on anti-electron collisions was unparalleled. Plus Tony was a huge fan of the way he loses control and turns into an enormous green rage monster. The latter of which, though, had him go underground a few years before, and many people believed that he was dead. Obviously he wasn’t, but what exactly did SHIELD want him here for? If it was for another consultant on gamma radiation, then shouldn’t he be poking the glowing cube of doom? What did Fury have him doing?

“You have twenty seconds before security cameras are back online, sir.”

“Do you have a lock on Banner’s location, JARV?”
Tony waited a second before a map of the base appeared on his watch, with a large green dot indicating Banner’s location. It was one floor up from the floor Tony was staying on. It wouldn’t look too suspicious if he got lost and ended up running into Banner on the wrong floor.

As Tony stepped out of his hiding spot, JARVIS began playing the Mission Impossible theme song into his earpiece. Tony smiled and set off. It was going to be an interesting day.

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“You people do realize that I’m not this kind of doctor, right?” Bruce asked.

“Maybe not, but you seemed to be doing fine at the clinic in India,” Natasha said with a shrug.

“And how would you know about that?” Bruce asked with a raised eyebrow. “I’ve been underground for five years.”

“Technically you were never underground. We always knew where you were, we just let you be.”

“Well that’s comforting.”

“I figured that this would have been explained to you before by Agent Hill.”

“Yeah… she didn’t go into too much detail. Just said a few things about a potential global catastrophe and needing to bring me in. She didn’t quite mention that the catastrophe required giving a body scan and physical to a twenty year old man.”

“Agent Hill may have exaggerated a bit, but the basic threat remains the same.”

“Oh good,” Bruce laughed. “I’d hate to feel like I’ve been tricked.”

Or used, is what he wanted to say. After the last time he was tracked down, Bruce had made the difficult decision to cut off all of his ties once more and leave before he could hurt anymore of the people that he loved. He didn’t want to be back in this place, under surveillance and just waiting until the moment they put him in a cage for their own use.

People didn’t understand. No one ever would. Bruce Banner had a life once. It was a good life too. Not at first, though. Throughout his childhood, his father was under a lot of stress and tried to find the solution at the bottom of a bottle. When that didn’t work, he took out his stress on Bruce. He never knew exactly why his father hated him so much, but whenever he saw Bruce reading one of his physics books, practicing his mathematics equations, or just simply breathing and existing, his father would fly into a rage. Maybe he could see something deep inside of Bruce, something that he wouldn’t discover himself until many years later.

Bruce always had his mother, though. She was a good woman. Kind and loving in a world that wanted to beat her down. Whenever his father flew into one of his rages, his mother was always there, ready to shield him from the worst damage and offer a kind word once the smoke was clear. She had taught Bruce a lot of things in his life. She taught him how to stay quiet and keep his head down, but most importantly, she taught him that no matter what, there were always some good
people in the world.

That changed, though, when Bruce’s father came after him one afternoon brandishing a knife. She jumped in the way to protect him. Strange how in a matter of seconds, Bruce went to having one person in the world who loved him to having no one at all. He didn’t even register the fact that his father was being taken away in handcuffs as he stared off into space. Beneath the surface, though, he could feel the beginnings of something stirring deep inside of him.

Life is a cruel thing, though, especially to the weak and meek. After his mother’s death, Bruce went from being the son of infamous atomic physicist Dr. Brian Banner to the son of a man who murdered his wife. No one ever let him forget it. Occasionally he would get a kind word from some adult, offering their sympathy to the poor boy who had gone through such a tragedy. For the most part, though, people would just stare. When Bruce entered a room, a silence would fall and eyes would turn in his direction. Everyone knew, as if he somehow had a damn sign over his head, everyone knew and they just watched, fascinated by the fact that Bruce could somehow go on existing. And every time he felt those stares, that feeling deep inside of him seemed to grow.

Then there were those who didn’t stare or offer any kind words. His mother had taught him to keep his head down and stay quiet, so that is what Bruce did through the remainder of his childhood. Unfortunately, being the son of a murder, being small, and being timid is a recipe for a particularly easy target, and that is what Bruce became. Not a day went by that Bruce didn’t receive some kind of hit or kick from the larger kids in his class. They would corner him, throw down his books, punch him, kick him, and tell him how he should be dead. Bruce never fought back. He always kept his head down and stayed quiet.

He went back every day, though, ready to repeat the cycle. His cousin Jennifer tried to tell him that there was a certain strength in that. He was a survivor, he wasn’t going to let anyone beat him down. Bruce didn’t agree. The way he saw it, life had taken so many shots at him, he didn’t know how to be anything other than a victim.

That thing inside of him, though…it never went away. Every day that he received a curious stare or a punch to the gut, that thing inside of him grew, expanded, and took a deeper root inside of him. He could feel it pulsing inside of him, clawing and screaming, just begging to be released out onto the world. It hurt, but it was a good. It made his blood rush, his veins pulse, and his heart beat faster. It became all consuming, invading his thoughts every day until he couldn’t take it anymore. The thing inside of him had to be let out.

Bruce was a gifted child. Taught himself to read before he was two, learned basic math at three, able to grasp concepts in his father’s physics books at five, and at ten years old, he assembled his first bomb. It was meant to go off in the basement of the school, under the floor of his classroom. It had a short-range detonation that would require Bruce to stand within five feet of the bomb to activate it. That was no mistake. If Bruce had wanted to live, then he knew what to do to ensure that he would. But Bruce didn’t want to live. He wanted to finish the job that his father—and life, it seemed—had started, but he also wanted to share his pain and rage, and take others with him.

But the bomb didn’t go off.

Bruce was expelled, then arrested, and then taken in by the government. Even though the bomb was a dud, they took note of his genius and saw the potential that his rage could produce. Life got better for Bruce after that. He was privately tutored, his genius and creativity fostered, and eventually he earned his doctorate in nuclear physics, taking up a job with the U.S. military. Bruce tried not to focus on the parallels of his father.

Then the most unexpected thing happened; Bruce fell in love. Betty came as a complete surprise in
Bruce’s life. He’d met her while working for her father, General Ross, on a secret experimental project for SHIELD. She was indescribable to Bruce. Like him, her mother had died when she was young, she had a strained relationship with her father, and was introverted herself. She was kind, though, and beautiful, both inside and out. The pulsing rage inside of Bruce had never really gone away—not even after they had plucked him out of that school’s basement—but Betty had a way of calming it inside of him. For the first time since his mother died, Bruce actually felt safe, loved even.

Then the day of the experiment happened. Bruce didn’t know what went wrong. He had all of his measurements in place, they had run the simulation multiple times; it should have gone perfectly. The explosion wasn’t the worst part, neither was being exposed to extremely lethal levels of gamma radiation. No, the worst part came days after, when he discovered that the pulsing rage, that thing that was always inside of him was finally given shape and able to finally be released.

If his handlers thought that he had potential beforehand, then they were practically salivating from the possibilities of what the Other Guy could do. What Bruce saw as a curse and punishment for ever giving thoughts to all of that anger inside of him, the military saw as a weapon. They wanted to control him, to put him in a cage and bring out the Other Guy. So Bruce ran. He gave up everything in his life, both good and bad, and ran as far as he could go.

For a while he thought he had everything under control. He stayed quiet and kept his head down. He worked so hard for so long to control this thing inside of him, pushing the Other Guy so far out of his thoughts so that he could forget. He tried to keep that rage in check, he tried so hard to just be normal…But then they found him again and brought him back.

He’d managed to evade them as best he could, but they were determined. They had his blood and created the abomination. Bruce didn’t want to, but there was no other way, and he had to keep Betty safe. He let the Other Guy out, let his rage tear through Harlem. He would have killed Blonsky that night, he wanted to. The only thing that stopped him was the only good thing in his life, Betty. She looked into the Other Guy’s eyes, not seeing the unnatural green color of the monster, but actually seeing Bruce. Unlike the others, she knew he was in there, that she could reach him. When she begged the Other Guy to stop, it was Bruce who had listened. And it was Bruce who had to make the horrible choice to flee once more. Even after all that he endured in his life, Bruce Banner can honestly say that leaving Betty would always be the most painful thing he’d ever had to endure.

When he fled that time he vowed to himself that he would do some good in this world. He couldn’t just keep his head down anymore and pray that the Other Guy would be pacified. He had to make a plan. Bruce would find a way to keep himself focused, keep the thing inside of him buried as he tried to help others. He would keep himself busy and make amends for the damage that this rage that he had always carried inside of him would bring about.

SHIELD and General Ross had taken a lot from him. They took away his life, Betty, and his ability to feel anything other than this hateful self-loathing…But he couldn’t exactly blame them for the Other Guy. He was born from the pain and rage that Bruce had carried with him and suppressed all of his life. He was always there. Bruce had given birth to him the day his mother lay bleeding on their kitchen floor, while his head was down and he stayed quiet. The least Bruce could do now was try to give back to the world, as a way to make amends for the creature he had created.

That’s where they found him in Calcutta, trying to make peace with all that he had done. When Maria Hill lured him outside of the city to talk, Bruce played with the idea of feigning bringing about the Other Guy, just to see what she would do. She had no right to be there, none of them did. Bruce ran away and gave up everything in his life to keep from being a part in SHIELD’s games,
he didn’t want to be pulled back in and thrown into a cage. Hill told him that Fury needed him on this, though, that they were facing a potential global catastrophe. The Tesseract—a device that Hill explained had the power to wipe out the planet—was unstable and Fury needed to know why, and how to control it. He wasn’t after the Other Guy, she claimed, but Bruce would see how true that statement actually was.

At the moment, though, his suspicions were beginning to grow again. He agreed to come and assist with the Tesseract, but as soon as he arrived he was pushed into the base’s medical lab. Bruce was given instructions to perform a physical and body scan on an unspecified patient, who Bruce was told nothing about except that he potentially contained levels of gamma radiation.

At first Bruce was furious, doing all he could to remain calm—he had seen the way even the most harden agents had tensed and stared in his direction—but inside he could feel the Other Guy beginning to stir. Even after the failure of the abomination, Bruce saw it as SHIELD trying to weaponize the experiment that had created the Other Guy. And on someone who was just out of their teens, no less! Fury spoke with him personally, though, and told him that wasn’t the case here. He wouldn’t go into details about who the person was or why their body emitted gamma radiation, but he warned Bruce that the man was potentially dangerous, almost as much as the Tesseract.

Looking through the glass, though, all Bruce saw was a skinny young man, looking vulnerable under a thin medical gown and shooting the breeze with the Captain America. It wasn’t what he was expecting when he agreed to come, to say the least, but Bruce rarely seemed to get what he wanted in life.

“So is anyone going to tell me what is so important about this guy?”

“Classified information for now, Dr. Banner. You have clearance for information on the Tesseract, but I’m afraid the one for him is a bit higher.”

“Not really a great way to start a doctor-patient relationship. Are there any medical records I can look at?”

“No.”

“No, I can’t look at them or no there aren’t any?”

“The latter.”

“Huh…Did he fall from the sky then?”

“Something like that,” Natasha answered. “Just preform the basic physical, Dr. Banner. Check heart, lungs, reflexes, and draw some blood. If Fury is right about him, then he has high levels of gamma radiation in his blood. Higher than yours even.”

“And Fury wants to use that to recreate my old experiments?”

“We’ve already told you, Dr. Banner, that’s not why you’re here.”

“Of course it’s not,” he scoffed.

Bruce took a deep breath and cracked his knuckles to relieve the stress that was building up inside of him. He didn’t miss the way Natasha tensed and her hand twitched in the direction of the gun on her hip.
“Let’s get on with this, shall we?” Bruce suggested. Natasha nodded and moved to open the door that would take them into the examination room.

“Just fair warning, this guy can come off as a bit hostile and defensive. Just try to remain calm and don’t let him rub you the wrong way.”

From deep inside of Bruce, he felt the Other Guy growl.

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Loki hummed to himself as he swung his bare legs over the edge of the medical table. He had been waiting in this room for quite some time now, his stomach growling louder with each passing minute. He had amicable feelings about Agent Romanoff before, but his patience with her was growing thinner with each minute he was forced to wait in this room. It had already been over an hour. If this was how Midgardians handled their healing processes, then it was no wonder to Loki that they keeled over so easily.

Steve was sitting beside him in a small swivel chair, nervously bouncing his foot and looking just as bored as Loki. He had tried to make idle conversation with Loki at first, but that had died down after ten minutes. Still, Loki was going to go out of his mind with boredom if he didn’t find some way to pass the time, so he thought that it would be best to try again.

“Will the healer be coming shortly, or is this where the Lady Romanoff intends to starve me?”

Steve’s lip curled up in the hint of a smirk before he answered. “I’m not sure where the doctor is right now, but this is pretty normal. I’m actually surprised how much this is like an actual hospital. Although in there, you usually have to wait this long just to get into a room like this.”

“Seriously?” Loki scoffed.

“I don’t understand it either,” Steve shrugged. “Once I waited almost two hours just to be put in a room smaller than this. I waited another hour just for a doctor to see me, give me a shot of penicillin and then send me on my way five minutes later.”

“For all of the time that they make you waste, the least they could do is put you somewhere where it won’t feel like you’ll go insane from looking at the blank walls.”

“Eh… I’ve seen worse. You weren’t around during the Polio epidemic. Trust me, hospitals were not the place you wanted to be then.”

“Have you been to many of these hospitals before?”

“Yeah,” Steve let out a noise that almost sounded like a laugh, but there was no humor behind it. “I was in and out of them for most of my life before... Well, before I joined the army.”

“You seem to be in prime physical condition,” Loki commented, raking his eyes over Steve’s impressive form. With his build and fair hair, the man could easily pass for Aesir. “What ailments did you possess? If you do not mind me asking.”

“Wow… um, it’s kind of a long list. Let’s see.” Steve tilted his head back to look at the ceiling and took a deep breath before continuing.

“Um… I was born color-blind, which prevents you from doing a lot in the military.”

“What is that?”
“Exactly what it sounds like. There are different kinds, like some people may not be able to see any kind of color or not see certain kinds. Mine was where I couldn’t distinguish between red and green. Which made for some pretty fun wardrobe mistakes, but all of our movies back then were in black-and-white, so I wasn’t missing much.”

“I’m quite fond of the color green,” Loki smiled. “I couldn’t imagine not being able to see it every day.”

“I like it too,” Steve returned the smile. After a second, his cheeks flushed and he sighed again. “Let’s see… Other than that, I had scoliosis, asthma, scarlet fever, rheumatic fever, chronic colds, heart palpitations, sinusitis, and I was diabetic and anemic. And my family had a history of high blood pressure, angina, and…tuberculosis took my mom.”

Loki blinked before his eyes grew as wide as saucers. “For Norns’ sake, man, how are you even alive?”

Steve laughed. “Yeah, that’s the question I go asked a lot. By doctors mostly.”

“You seem fine now, though. What changed?”

“There was uh…one doctor in particular. He… he could see past everything that was wrong with me and he found something that was right. He helped me, made me… I don’t want to say good, but definitely better.”

“What was it in you that he saw as good?”

“My heart… When I joined the army, they were looking for the perfect soldier and I was the furthest thing from it. But the doctor, he told me he wasn’t looking for a perfect soldier, just a good man.”

Steve’s eyes broke from Loki’s gaze and he stared off into the distance. Loki was worried at first, but then he saw the ghost of a smile on Steve’s lips. Whoever this doctor was, judging by the look in Steve’s eyes, he must have been important.

“Well he found one.”

Steve’s trance broke and he looked back to Loki. He seemed to take a moment, almost as if he were searching for something in Loki’s expression, before he gave Loki the most genuine smile he’s seen on the captain since he’d arrived.

“Thanks, Loki.”

Then the captain did the oddest thing. He unclenched the hand that had been balled into a fist at his side, reached out and gently touched Loki’s. The prince watched with confusion when Steve’s fingers jumped as they first touched his skin. After a moment’s pause, though, he relaxed and slipped his hand into Loki’s. Loki continued to stare on as Steve gently squeezed his hand. Typically, Loki would have a problem with such familiarity, but he was still processing when the door to the room finally opened. Steve’s hand was gone before Lady Romanoff and a man Loki didn’t know stepped into the room.

“Lady Romanoff,” Loki greeted the agent. “I see that you’ve not forgotten about us.”

“I’m sorry for the delay, gentlemen. I was retrieving Dr. Banner.” She looked to her left to indicate the other man.
“Hello Mr. L- Lauf…yeah, I can’t pronounce that and I won’t insult you by trying. May I call you Loki?”

“That is the name I was given.”

“Alright, Loki. I’m Dr. Banner. I’m going to be doing some simple examinations with you today and we’ll finish with a body scan. Is that ok?”

“I don’t have much of a choice in the matter, do I?”

Loki watched as the smile the man had forced fell a little bit. From his peripheral, he also saw how Natasha tensed and flashed her eyes to the doctor. Odd.

“No… I guess you really don’t.”

Honesty from his captors. Loki found that refreshing.

The man made a gesture to the chair that Steve was sitting on. Understanding, the captain got up and moved back to stay out of the way. Natasha handed Banner a brown clipboard with paperwork on it that Loki couldn’t make out, and he grabbed a pen before setting down in front of Loki.

“Loki, have you ever had a physical before?”

“I may have. It depends on what exactly that is.”

Banner opened his mouth to answer, but Steve beat him to it. “It’s where a doctor asks you a few questions about your medical history—like if you’ve had any diseases or on-going medical conditions. Then he’ll take your blood pressure, listen to your heart, and look into your ears and eyes.”

“And you do this all manually?” Loki asked, raising a brow in disbelief.

“Yeah,” Steve nodded. “How else would you do it?”

“With a soul forge. Eir always used it to—”

“Captain Rogers, perhaps you would prefer to wait outside?” Natasha interrupted. “Dr. Banner is on a limited time schedule and it would be best if we moved this along.”

Steve’s back straightened at her suggestion. “No, I’ll stay. I won’t get in your way.”

“See that you don’t.”

Loki liked her.

The doctor clenched his fist for a moment before he seemed to relax. That caught Loki’s attention. He could actually feel the doctor’s tension, almost as if he had been physically touched. Odd.

“Alright, Loki, since I don’t have anything about your medical history, can you tell me if you have any allergies or ailments that I should know about?”

“Nothing in particular comes to mind. The healers always ensured that I was in good health. Although I do have a sensitivity to extreme heat… It is just a condition of my nature.”

“Can you explain a bit more?” Banner asked, making a note on the paperwork.
“When my body becomes overheated, I become faint and nauseous. Back ho—where I came from, if I went out into the daylight, I would be overcome by the heat very quickly, and my skin would burn intensely.”

“Solar urticarial? That’s pretty rare.”

“Where I come from, yes,” Loki laughed. “It does not seem to affect me so much here, though. Your climate is less intense than what I am used to.”

“Alright then. Anything else that I should be aware of?”

Loki raised a brow and looked over to Natasha. When she had brought them to this room, she made mention that the doctor they were bringing in did not know of his origins nor of the fact that he belonged to a different species. She was not specific on whether or not Loki was to inform the good doctor about his nature; all she had said was that he was to answer the doctor’s questions, but keep it brief. When he looked to her now, she gave a slight shake of her head, so Loki told the doctor no.

The doctor nodded and began to work. He checked Loki’s pulse and blood pressure, checked his reflexes, looked into his ears and eyes, and all the while made little notes on his paperwork. The strangest bit for Loki, though, was when he had Loki open his mouth so that he could point a light and look inside. Loki wasn’t sure exactly what he was looking for, but he must have found something out of the ordinary if the furrow of his brows made any indication.

As he was examining him, though, Loki kept his focus on Dr. Banner. There was something off about the man, something that he had not encountered in any of the other mortals of this realm. Loki couldn’t quite explain it, but the best he could describe would be something similar to a pull. There was something in the other man that was pulling Loki to him, almost like a recognition of something that Loki was not aware of. Whatever it was, it was faint, just enough to catch Loki’s attention, but not enough for him to pinpoint exactly what it was.

Then the caught the doctor’s eye when he was looking in his mouth. Banner’s eyes were a light shade of brown, but when they made contact with Loki, something happened. Swirls of dark green appeared in his irises. Loki thought that perhaps he was just imagining it, but as they held the gaze more of the green shade began to appear, consuming the brown. The hand that was holding the small light began to shake, and the doctor quickly pulled back and away from Loki.

“Everything alright, Dr. Banner?” Natasha asked, her hand going to the weapon on her hip again.

“Y…yeah,” he said, taking a few deep breaths. “Everything is fine. Just…feeling a little tense.”

Loki watched as the man ran his fingers through his dark curly hair, taking breaths as if to calm himself.

The light pull that Loki felt grew with each heavy pant the man took. Loki could practically feel the man’s heart pounding as if he were holding it in his hand.

“Do you need to step outside for a moment?”

“No, I think I can—”

Natasha cut him off when she saw how the man’s fist clenched again. Even Steve, who didn’t understand the situation fully, pushed himself from the wall and took a step forward, putting a protective hand on Loki’s shoulder.

“Dr. Banner, I suggest you take a moment outside. I’ll take Loki down the hall for the CT body scan. You can join us there and finish up when you’ve calmed down.”
“I am calm,” Banner said in a tone that suggested he was anything but.

“Dr. Banner,” Natasha said with an even, but forceful tone. This time, the doctor nodded and listened to her.

Dr. Banner stood and forced a smile at both Loki and Steve. Loki winced a little when he felt Steve’s fingers grip tighter on his shoulder. That mortal was too strong for his own good.

“Loki, Captain Rogers I uh… I’m sorry about this. Whenever you’re ready, Loki, I will meet you down the hall.”

“Of course, Dr. Banner,” Loki nodded. For a brief second, he saw that flash of green in the man’s eyes again.

The doctor quickly turned on his heels and made for the door. Before he could reach the handle, though, the door began to open. The doctor stepped back, Natasha’s hand quickly pulled the gun at her hip, and Steve’s fingers tightened to the point where Loki could feel the bruise all the way down to the bone.

A man with dark hair and a well sculpted goatee poked his head into the room, dark eyes glancing about as if he were surprised.

“Oh, this isn’t my room,” the man laughed. He opened the door a little wider so that he could properly stand in the doorway. The man was dressed in a casual manner, much like Steve and Loki, but there was a strange blue light coming from beneath his dark grey shirt.

“Stark,” Natasha said. She lowered her gun a little bit, but still kept it aimed at the man’s chest.

Stark?

“Hey, Natalie!” The man smiled. “I mean, it is Natalie, isn’t it? Or was it Natalia… or whatever the hell your real name is. Anyway, good to see you again. Love the short hair on you.”

“What are you doing here, Stark? You’re not cleared for this level.”

“Not cleared for this level?” The man asked with a scoff. “Strange, because my room is actually somewhere on this floor.”

“You’re one floor up, Stark. Nice try.”

“Am I?” The man made pained face. “Damn, must have slipped my mind. I’ll just go now and you keep guys doing your super-secret, creepy lab experiments and—hey!”

The man’s eyes turned to the doctor, as if he were just noticing him for the first time. A blatant lie that both Loki and Natasha could see right through.

“You’re Dr. Bruce Banner, aren’t you?”

“Um, yes I—”

The man didn’t let him finish before he stepped forward and took the doctor’s hand in his own.

“Tony Stark,” the man introduced himself. “Pleasure meeting you, Dr. Banner. I’ve just got to say, your work on thermonuclear energy has been inspiring. And your work with positron collision… I still get goosebumps. Plus I’m a huge fan of the whole Hulk thing. Oh, listen to me gush,” he laughed.
“I…uh… Thank you. I think,” Banner responded slowly. His eyes narrowed a bit in mild confusion, still trying to take in what the hell was happening. The man across from him though had a wide smile that lit up his whole face.

He seemed familiar, but Loki couldn’t place him. Stark. That name struck a chord with Loki because of that infuriating Howard Stark and his connection to Steve, but there was something about this man as well—particularly his name—that Loki seemed to recall.

“So, what brings you here with Ms. Rushman and—holy shit! That’s Captain America.”

The smile disappeared from the man’s face, replaced with one of extreme disbelief.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think we’ve met before,” Steve said. “In fact I know we didn’t.”

“Huh… He’s a bit more hostile than what I always imagined. The way my dad always talked, ol’ Stars n’ Stripes was the model image of politeness. Ate all of his vegetables and didn’t interrupt when grown-ups were talking, too…Although I think that last bit Howard just added to shut me up.”

“Howard?” Steve repeated. “You’re Howard Stark’s son?”

Now that did ring a bell in Loki’s mind. The name suddenly came back to him as well, pulling up long buried memories of being in a darkened nightclub nearly two centuries before.

“I’m Tony. Tony Stark… or ‘Oh God, please more’ depending on how the night goes.”

Loki’s eyes widened a fraction at the realization. There was no possible way… It was far too great a coincidence. Unfortunately, before Loki could ponder on it any further, Steve’s fingers once again dug into Loki’s skin. This time Loki felt the bones in his shoulder-joint grind. He let out a loud, undignified yelp at the pain, and Steve instantly let go.

“Oh God, I’m sorry, Loki!”

“It’s alright, Steve.”

“I—I didn’t mean to. I’m so sorry!”

“It is fine, Steve. I heal quickly.”

The man—Tony—turned his attention from Steve and cast his curious eyes down to Loki. If Loki had any doubt beforehand, then looking into those familiar brown eyes took it away. This was definitely the young man he had met that night… And it seemed that he was recognizing him as well.

“You look familiar,” he told Loki. “Do I know you from somewhe—”

Tony was cut off mid-sentence by a low buzzing sound and his body instantly stiffened. Tony’s spine straightened to the point that his chest was poking out. The blue light beneath his shirt flickered a few times, but remained glowing. Tony let out strained gasps of pain until he fell down to the ground before Banner’s feet.

As the man fell to his stomach, gasping for air, Loki saw that there were two tiny rods sticking from his back. The rods connected to two wires that ran up to a gun, being held by a blond man standing in the doorway. The new man was wearing a tight black shirt, a weapon on his hip similar to Natasha’s, and the most annoyed and irritable expression that Loki had ever seen on another
“Barton,” Natasha nodded to the man. “You’re losing your touch.”

“Sorry. He got out of the lab before I could get down from the perch.”

“Still doesn’t explain how he got up here or into the room before you caught him.”

“Just wanted to see what he would do,” the man shrugged.

“What he did was violate about seven different security protocols and waste more of our time, because now he’s going to have to be examined by a doctor,” she said with an annoyed tone. This was the first time that Loki had seen the woman actually express any kind of emotion. It was mildly frightening, but the man just smirked.

“What can I say? I’m a curious person.”

From the floor, Tony was groaning in pain and muttering something about a heart condition. Dr. Banner knelt to the floor to gently roll Tony onto his side, checking his pulse and ensuring that his breathing was steady. The two agents were just standing over them, Natasha trying to stare Barton down while the other couldn’t keep the smirk off of his face if he tried. Next to Loki, Steve was gaping like a fish at the odd and sudden turn of events—because, honestly, this escalated quickly—and was looking back and forth between the two men on the floor and the agents near the door.

Loki just stared down at the groaning figure on the floor when an amused smile came to his lips. His stomach growled again, though, and his amusement went away.

He really hoped that these damn people would let him eat soon.

Chapter End Notes

Ta-da! Sorry it's not as spectacular as I wanted it to be, but those silly Avengers are all in one room, enjoying Tony Stark writhing on the floor in pain. Good times.

Unfortunately I won't be able to update or write for a bit, because I am in the process of moving. I will try, though.

Thanks for sticking with me!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Ok, again not the most exciting chapter. A lot of dialogue and back-story, and what not. It's gonna be like this for a bit as everyone gets to know each other, work up some trust, work through some issues, and Loki does his scheming. Although someone may be doing some scheming of their own. ^_^

Also, I tried to use the power of science in this chapter, but I know NOTHING about science, medicine or biology. Forgive me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Agent Phil Coulson was not a happy man at the moment. There were many reasons for his current state of discontent, and it was hard to pin down a specific one. It could be because rumors about his former protégé, Agent Amador, being spotted in Northern Europe proved false; it could be that tonight was the unofficial eighth month anniversary of his and Audrey’s first date, and he didn’t even have the time to message her on Skype to let her know how much he missed her; it could be that Barton drank the last of the regular coffee and didn’t put on a new pot; hell, it could have been anything. If Coulson had to guess, though, the cause of his growing headache was sitting on the other side of the one-way mirror, flanked by two armed guards while being checked out by a SHIELD doctor. Tony Stark had been tased…and Coulson wasn’t the one to do it. That would put anyone in a bad mood.

Coulson let out a heavy sigh and leaned himself against the glass on one arm. Through the glass, he could see Tony saying something to the doctor inspecting him while making wild hand gestures and gesturing to the arc reactor under his shirt. Typical protocol usually called for suspect’s conversations to be put on over the speaker, but Coulson was in no mood. The conversations were taped anyway, so the write up for the paperwork could be done later.

“So how much did he actually see?” Coulson asked the agent standing behind him.

Barton stepped forward, arms crossed and face in its usual scowl. “He was in the room for at most three minutes. He recognized Banner, Natasha, and the Captain.”

“Did he happen to see our visitor?”

“He saw him,” Barton nodded. “Said something to him, but I couldn’t make it out. I hit him with the stun gun before he could finish whatever the hell he was saying.”

“I see,” Coulson took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Any chance he saw any of the medical files Banner wrote up? Did he take any pictures?”

“I don’t think so. Natasha said he was mostly focused on Banner when he came in the room. He probably went looking for him specifically. I don’t think he took any kind of pictures. All he had on him tech wise was his watch.”

“Make sure to confiscate it, then. If he’s wearing any contact lenses, take them. His shoes too. I don’t put it past him to do that Get Smart shit. How did he even find Banner, or know that he was
“You got me, boss,” Barton shrugged. “There were a few minutes between the lab and the exam room where I lost sight of him. He probably hacked into the mainframe then, so who knows what else he’s found by now. Sir, if he did download it from his watch then he’s probably got a failsafe that would wipe everything if we try to confiscate it.”

“Most likely,” Coulson agreed. “Have Ward send it down to the tech team and see if Fitz can salvage anything.”

“If Stark did hack into any of the files, then Ward doesn’t have the clearance for them.”

“Ward is a weapons specialist, not tech. He’ll be ok with delivering a watch.”

“If you say so,” Barton huffed.

“Agent Barton, if you’re so concerned, then you can walk Ward down to tech and stand guard personally.”

Barton shot Coulson a look of disbelief, but Coulson didn’t so much as blink. Not wanting to push the issue, Clint nodded and turned to leave. Though Coulson’s voice was even and his demeanor was calm, Clint knew when to get the hell out of the danger zone.

Once Barton was gone, Coulson turned back to the glass to see Stark. Currently the billionaire was reluctantly lifting his shirt so that the doctor could examine the skin around his arc reactor. Stark winced when the doctor gently put a finger on the black, burned skin near the reactor. The tasers used by SHIELD were a bit higher voltage than the typical ones found in the public market, but typically the types of wounds received from them were occasional muscle spasms and deep bruising. With the reaction from the device in Stark’s chest, though, the electricity ran around his torso and spread out from the reactor. The skin directly surrounding it was burned and would definitely need to be treated, other parts were starting to blister. There was no doubt that Stark was in a hell of a lot of pain and would need to be observed over the next few days.

“Damn it,” Coulson hit his fist against the glass.

Fury was going to tear him a new one for letting Stark get into that room. To be honest, he was surprised that the Director wasn’t there giving him an earful already. Coulson knew that bringing Stark in would only lead to trouble. Yes, he could potentially be an asset in studying the Tesseract, but Stark was too inquisitive for his own good, and he didn’t know how to play by the rules. All he cared about was his own image, his own sense of fame. He didn’t care about the bigger picture, just the moment at hand. He was dangerous. It was the reason he was turned down for the Avengers program, and the reason he shouldn’t have been allowed anywhere near SHIELD.

Now it was up to Coulson to find out exactly what Stark knew.

The agent took a few breaths in order to calm himself before he entered the exam room. As soon as Stark saw him, those brown eyes went wide with almost a look of fear before narrowing down to a scowl.

“You know, for all of your threats over the years, I never thought you would actually have the balls to do it,” Stark said.

“Unfortunately—as much as I would like to—I can’t take credit for this,” Coulson said. “Shocking as though it may be.”
“Ha, ha. Funny. Make puns when I could have been killed.”

“Mr. Stark,” the doctor interjected, “aside from some deep bruising, most of the damage is superficial. Your heart is fine, and you’ll most likely be good as new in a month.”

“I have fucking metal in my chest,” Stark exclaimed. “What the hell about adding electricity seemed like a good idea?”

“Calm down, Stark,” Coulson said. He gave a look to the doctor and the two guards. Each of them nodded and began to walk towards the exit.

“Hey, where are you going?” Stark called after them. “Hey! Don’t leave me alone in here with him.”

“I’m the least of your problems right now, Stark.”

Very calmly, Coulson took a seat across from the exam table Stark was sitting on. He waited and said nothing for a moment, just watching as Stark squirmed under his gaze. The billionaire was shifting uncomfortably on the table, hands fidgeting and eyes trying to look anywhere but on Coulson. This was going to be interesting.

“So what do you know?” Coulson started.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Coulson let out a heavy sigh and rubbed his temple. “Look, Stark, I’d love to get into the whole rough interrogation with you. Do our usual back and forth, with you denying everything until I get the chance to rough you up a bit more—honestly, nothing would make me happier—but as it is, we’re on a tight schedule and I have a massive headache forming. So cut your bullshit and tell me exactly what you were snooping around for, and what exactly you’ve found. And please don’t insult me by saying that you didn’t hack into our files… You’ll just annoy me.”

The genius let out a quick laugh at Coulson’s bluntness and finally turned his eyes towards him. A moment passed where he didn’t say a word before he gave his tiny, smug smirk.

“I was trying to find out more about the glowing cube of doom you’ve got stashed down in the lab.”

“We’ve told you what you need to know, Stark.”

“Yeah, you did the whole government censored cover-up thing, but it wasn’t enough for me. I’m a curious person,” he shrugged. “I just wanted to know if I’m being manipulated into creating the next global superbomb.”

“That never concerned you before.”

Stark’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “It does now. I’m not your fucking Merchant of Death anymore, so if SHIELD has me down here just so they can use me to weaponize whatever the hell that extremely dangerous thing is down there, then you may as well just show me the door now.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there, Stark… What were you doing on the medical floor?”

“I was looking for my ro—”

“Don’t!” Coulson snapped. “Don’t even try to finish that excuse.”
“Fine… I was looking for Banner.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s fucking Bruce Banner,” Stark scoffed. “I don’t know what he is to you guys, but in the science community meeting him is like the equivalent to meeting, well… me. I wanted to see what he was doing here.”

“We brought him in to help with studying and stabilizing the Tesseract.”

“Really? Because that wasn’t what it looked like he was doing when I found him.”

“…And what did it look like he was doing?”

“I don’t know,” Stark shrugged. “Looked like he was standing in a room with your girl Natasha and fucking Captain America. Wasn’t he supposed to be dead?”

“He was, but now he’s not. Did you see anything else?”

“No…” Stark said slowly. “Just them and that guy in the hospital gown. Who was that guy, anyway? I swear I’ve seen him before somewhere.”

“He’s no one of concern, Stark.”

“See, the way you say that makes me concerned.”

This is where Coulson knew he had to tread careful ground. He wasn’t authorized to tell Stark the truth, but he couldn’t just threaten him to stay away from it either. If he did, it would only pique Stark’s interest and this scenario would unfold all over again.

“I don’t know where you may have seen him, but he’s a newly recruited agent, fresh out of the academy. We’re experimenting with the formula for the serum from Rogers’ original procedure. Dr. Banner is the only person alive who has come close to recreating it, and though he may have failed before, we feel more confident in it now that we actually have Rogers in the facility.”

Stark gave a quick “hmm” in response.

“Any more questions?”

“Uh… no, I think I’m good for now.”

“Good,” Coulson nodded. “You’re done with the Tesseract for today. You may take the night to rest and be ready to start again in the morning.”

“Am I allowed to get out of this damn building?”

“Until you’ve finished what we brought you here to do, then no. The two agents outside will be escorting you back to your room. I advise you to remain there until you’re collected in the morning.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then I send Agent Romanoff after you, and trust me, what you’re feeling now is nothing but a fraction of what she can do to you.”

“I seriously doubt that,” he scoffed.
“Care to find out?” Stark didn’t say a word. “Didn’t think so. Have a good night, Stark. Rest well and be ready when we call on you in the morning.”

Coulson got up from the chair, left the room, and instructed the guards outside to personally escort Stark back to his room. Stark seemed genuine about not knowing who Loki was. If he had somehow managed to get into the files pertaining to him, he most likely would have denied it outright, and Coulson would have been able to read through his bullshit. What he did say about him was a touch unsettling, though. He didn’t claim to know Loki or what he was doing there, but he had some small recognition of him. Obviously Loki has been coming to Earth off and on for centuries, so it is not completely outside of the realm of possibility that he had previously run into Tony Stark before… The question is, though, whether it was a coincidence or not.

The only recorded incidence of Loki interacting with any government officials had been when he was under Colonel Phillips and Captain Rogers’ custody, where he met Howard Stark. Had Loki scoped out the military strategies or Stark’s research? Stark was—and still remains—one of the greatest assets in military defense. Was Loki’s whole presence on Earth just the result of a reconnaissance mission by his people? Those were the questions that Coulson needed answered.

Pressing his finger to the com in his ear, Coulson sent word to Natasha, “Agent Romanoff, see if you can determine Loki’s connection to Stark. I trust you to be subtle about it.”

***

“Copy that,” Natasha answered quietly. Turning to look over her shoulder, she could see that Loki and Steve had found an empty table near the corner of the large break room.

As promised, Natasha had brought the men to the kitchens for breakfast following Loki’s body scan. She was curious as to what Banner was going to make of the results of Loki’s physical and scan, but that knowledge was reserved for Banner and Fury alone. She would have to settle with just being curious. For now, she was stuck with babysitting duty, the reason being that, should Loki or Steve suddenly become violent, Natasha was one of the very few who could possibly hold her own. Though she hoped it wouldn’t come to that, she wouldn’t mind flexing her muscles for a bit. It had been a while since she had been on a field assignment.

With thoughts of Budapest in her mind and a slight smile on her lips, Natasha took her tray with a small bowl of oatmeal and an apple, and went to sit with the other two. When she got to the table, neither men were speaking. Loki was busy practically inhaling his stack of waffles while Steve was staring down absently as he pushed the eggs on his plate with his fork. She could only guess as to what he was thinking about, but whatever it was likely wasn’t good.

Natasha had her days like that, days when the past just won’t stay where it was and everything plays on a loop before her eyes. One of the images that came most often to Natasha on those kinds of days was that of Volk. Volk was her dog, given to her as a puppy on her sixth birthday. She remembered that day very clearly. Her mother had died in the fire in their home four months before then, but Natasha—then Natalia—had been spared. Her mother’s dying act had been to throw Natasha out of the window and into the arms of Ivan Petrovitch, their neighbor and member of the Soviet Army. As her mother burned alive, Petrovitch held Natasha close to chest, covering her ears so that the little girl wouldn’t have to hear the screams. Petrovitch was a good man. He wanted to make sure that Natasha would be well cared for…which is why he took her to them. He took her to the abandoned building with the big red door, led her inside, and showed her to her room.

The room was grey, emotionless, and containing only a bed. Twice every day, someone would bring her food, but wouldn’t speak to her. No one would speak to her at all. The only company she had then were two books: *Voyna i mir* and *Matka*. Natasha thinks that she cried from the loneliness...
for the first few weeks, but it was hard to remember. Being in that room alone for so long made time blur together, and she had trouble remembering everything.

She very clearly remembered the day the door opened, and Petrovitch walked through with an auburn colored East Siberian Lakia in his arms. Without saying a word, Petrovitch set the puppy down on the ground where it eagerly ran into Natasha’s arms. The little animal was shaking from how hard it was wagging its tail as it tried to lick Natasha’s face clean. After being emotionally cut off for so long, Natasha had almost forgotten what it was like to love something. As she held the puppy in her arms, though, she felt like nothing had changed in those few months. If she held on to the puppy, closed her eyes, and wished hard enough, then she would wake up in her old home, her mother sitting right behind her and telling her that she loved her. She knew it wouldn’t happen, but when she opened her eyes, there was something in her arms that loved her unconditionally, and that was enough to make it all better.

Petrovitch told Natasha to take very good care of the puppy and train him well, because one day he’ll be very useful to her.

She named the puppy Volk after the wolf in her favorite cartoon, *Nu, pogodi!* Although her Volk didn’t ice-skate, do ballet or gymnastics, or wear bell-bottom pants and smoke, he was just as clever. He always came when Natasha called and responded to the commands she began to teach him. The best part about him, though, was that he was the confidant that Natasha could confide all of her thoughts to, keep her company when she became lonely, and snuggle up to her at night, making her feel warm and loved.

The day she received Volk was also another major turning point in her life. It was the day that they began to train her. She was finally brought out of her room and introduced to her new guardians, three men dressed in black uniforms. They said they had big plans for her and one day she will make a valuable asset to the state. Natasha was then introduced to the other children under their care, a group of boys and girls of various ages. The youngest was a four year-old girl, the oldest a nineteen year-old boy. Age didn’t matter, though, when they were all pitted against each other.

The first part of Natasha’s training was to learn how not to feel pain. By doing so, she was handed over to the three oldest recruits and beaten until she couldn’t walk. She was given enough time to heal before it happen again, and again, and again until she learned not to cry or react to the pain at all. Every night, though, Volk was in her bed, ready to lick her wounds.

After learning how to receive pain, she had to learn how to give it. They made her start on herself, having her cut her palm with a knife. Every day, each time reopening the wound until she couldn’t register the pain. When they felt she was ready, she had to deliver the pain to someone else. They gave her one of the younger children to start with, again giving the younger ones cuts to their palms. She had felt bad about it at first, whenever she saw tears come to the little ones’ eyes, but the remarks of praise she received from her handlers outweighed her guilt. She didn’t take joy in hurting the others, she didn’t lie awake at night thinking about cut skin, broken arms, or the creative ways that she could inflict pain on those smaller and weaker than her; she just eventually became numb to it for the promise of a kind word from those who were supposed to be taking care of her and, occasionally, a hug from Petrovitch.

Her lessons weren’t all about pain, though. Her handlers taught her how to steel her emotions, how to manipulate, how to operate various weapons and technology, and how to use her body’s natural ability to move quickly and efficiently. By the time she was seven, she could pass a lie detector test. At eight, she was one of their best marksmen and could speak English and German. At nine she had managed to take down the oldest of the children in the group using only her bare hands. By the time she was ten, she made it through the worst of their trials without so much as a scratch. It
was then that they knew she was ready.

On her eleventh birthday, they brought her into a room with no windows for her final test. Her three guardians and Petrovitch were sitting at a table before her, while she was instructed to remain standing still for their orders. They kept her standing there for four hours straight, watching as the muscles of her legs strained to keep her still. After the fourth hour, they brought in Volk.

As soon as Volk was brought into the room, her companion had barked happily and ran to her side, wagging his tail. Natasha was told to have him sit, and she did. Volk obeyed faithfully, sitting on his haunches and looking up at her for her next command. Meanwhile Natasha waited for hers.

Her final test, they said, would be her hardest. In order to become the weapon that they needed—that they wanted—Natasha had to become numb to all emotions. She had already proven that she could block out the various emotions that made a person human. She didn’t feel pain, empathy, guilt, remorse, or even hope anymore. All of those things inside of her were killed long ago. The only thing left to kill now was her heart. In order to become their weapon, she had to destroy that last little part of her that represented the love that she still had left to give: Volk.

They handed her a gun and commanded her to shoot Volk in the head. Volk was sitting obediently on the ground in front of her, his tail slightly wagging as he waited for her to smile and scratch his head the way she always would when they were together. She looked into his dark brown eyes for a long time. She thought about the day he first ran into her arms, the countless nights he fell asleep with his head protectively on her lap, the days that he would lick up the tears she still had to shed. In all her years with them, Volk truly was the only thing she had ever loved and that had ever loved her unconditionally.

She didn’t even blink when she pulled the trigger.

After Volk, they knew she was ready to be released out into the world. Though the Soviet Union and the KGB had dissolved by the time she turned eleven, there was still need of her. She spent the next thirteen years as their puppet, carrying out their deeds with no true will of her own… They made her do so many things; so many horrific, unspeakable things that she eventually lost count. She’d been forced to seduce and kill at age twelve, assassinated more than twenty people by the time she was fifteen, stolen from and tortured so many more before she ever turned twenty. There was just so much she had done. Sao Palo, the hospital fire, Kiev, Alexi Shostakov, the bombs, the screams of Rada Arkhipova as she begged for the life of her unborn child, and so much more… So much red, gushing and bleeding from her ledger.

It would have been more, too, if Barton hadn’t captured her in Berlin. She was there to capture the monarch of Latveria as he attended an international conference. Barton was there to capture and kill her. He was good, better than anyone she had ever gone up against. Natasha prided herself on her ability to assess any situation and spot any threat, but she had never even known that Barton had her in his site from two buildings away. He could have killed her then…but he didn’t. Natasha never understood why, but instead of killing her, he made the call to disobey his orders, spare her life, and bring her in. And once again, her life changed.

Natasha’s emotions died a long time ago. Love and compassion were for children. She’d learned that lesson a long time ago. She stayed with SHIELD—with Barton—because she owed a debt. In her eight years with SHIELD, she had saved his life in the field enough times to have that debt repaid five times over, but still she stayed. The truth that she didn’t want to admit to herself, though, was that the longer she stayed with SHIELD, the more her conscience began to return to her. Natasha knew how to block out the guilt and remorse, that was no problem… Still, there were days when she thought about her ledger and how soaked in blood it was. She wanted to wipe it
So, as one soldier—one weapon—to another, she could recognize the look in Steve’s eyes. That haunted, faraway look when all one could think about was the past. When Natasha wore that look herself, she wasn’t thinking about all that she had done or all that was in her ledger. Instead, she thought about Volk. All of the horror, all of the pain and death, it had all begun with Volk.

From across the table, Loki was shoving another forkful of waffles into his mouth and moaning almost sensuously. Natasha quirked an eyebrow, intrigued by the reaction he was having. The food served in SHIELD was edible at best. Certainly not worthy of this kind of response.

“Good breakfast?” She asked.

Loki swallowed the food in his mouth and nodded to her. “I do believe that I will gain at least two stones by the time you decide to let me go.”

“No waffles where you’re from, then?”

“None at all.” Loki took another bite and grinned through his chewing. “I must admit that in my previous travels here, I never took the time to sample the cuisine that you mortals had to offer. I can go long periods without eating if necessary, and at first I was too nervous to try anything here.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, as you said earlier, I don’t know if there is anything on this realm that would be harmful to my body. I tended to stick with meats and fruit that we had in Asgard as well. Now that I’ve had the chance to try what you mortals can create, though, I am quite displeased that I waited so long.”

“Hmm,” Natasha nodded. “Just wait until you try pizza. You’ll never want to leave after that.”

“He’s not going back.” Steve spoke so suddenly that it took Natasha by surprise, though she didn’t physically react. Both she and Loki looked over to Steve, whose cheeks were beginning to flush red from embarrassment. He looked back down at his plate and cleared his throat.

“He already said he’s not going back,” Steve said quickly. “So… there would be no point for him to leave, right?”

“Yeah, he did say that,” Natasha agreed, keeping her voice slow and steady.

“And I meant it,” Loki added. “I have no intention of going back to that place, so you may as well cook that ‘pizza’ and give me more incentive to stay.”

Steve laughed at that. “Well if you want pizza, I wouldn’t recommend getting it here. You’d have to go to New York. No one makes them like they do back home. There is this one place down the block from my apartment called Totonno’s. Best pizza I ever had by far. Bucky and I used to—”

Steve suddenly stops his ranting, his mouth still hanging open and that look returning to his eyes. Natasha watched carefully as the hand holding his fork started trembling again until he set the utensil down and took his hand off the table.

“I- I mean, it was down the block…from where my old apartment was. It’s probably gone by now.”

“No, it’s still there,” Natasha said. Steve turned to give her a questioning look. “Totonno’s Pizza on Neptune Avenue. It’s still there. I’ve been a couple of times while I was in the city. You’re right
it’s good.”

A smile began to form on Steve’s lips, spreading out slowly in a shy manner. “It’s really still there, after all this time?”

“Yes, it is.”

“I… I used to help out my mom by selling papers when I was a kid. It didn’t pay much, just a couple of cents a week… Once in a while, when we could afford it, me and B—my friend would save up what we could and go see a picture and get a slice… It was one of my favorite things.”

“We shall definitely have to go, then,” Loki said. “If it is as good as you say, then we will most definitely have to go and get ourselves some of this pizza.”

“Yeah,” Steve smiled wide. “I think I’d like that… Provided SHIELD lets you out of here any time soon. I think it’s a bit too far to make deliveries.”

“As I said before, Captain Rogers, Loki is not under arrest. We do appreciate his cooperation, though.”

“I’m left with little other choice,” Loki said.

“Something tells me that if you really wanted to leave, then you wouldn’t be here.”

Loki didn’t say anything, but he raised his eyebrow at her response and smirked. Natasha held his gaze and took a bite of her apple. She knew Loki’s type, the ones with something to hide. Often they would cooperate and go along with whatever the higher authority wanted, but in the end they were always out for themselves. The unfortunate truth that she found in this world is that no matter how altruistic one may appear, the motives behind it tended to be selfish. Now she just needed to know what exactly Loki wanted.

Sensing that there was rising tension in the air, Steve decided to break it. “Well, if SHIELD is letting us out for pizza, then we should at least make a day of it. Is Coney Island still around?”

“Remind me to introduce you to Google later,” Natasha answered. When Steve gave her a confused look, she said, “Yes.”

“Well,” he turned his attention back to Loki, “we’ll go to Totonno’s and then out to Coney Island.”

“What is that place?”

“This really amazing amusement area down near the beach. The boardwalk was always the most fun. There was a lot of carnival games and rollercoasters.”

“Did you go on the Cyclone?” Natasha asked.

“Once… I threw up,” he admitted.

“I take it that was before all of this,” she gestured her hand at him, indicating his muscles.

“…Yeah,” he nodded.

“What’s a rollercoaster?” Loki asked.

Neither Natasha nor Steve answered him. They both looked at each other and then, oddly, began to smile knowingly at one another.
“You’ve got to let me take him now,” Steve laughed.

“...I’ll pass the idea along to Coulson and Director Fury. I wouldn’t get your hopes up, though. It’s doubtful that they’d be willing to let Loki out into the world without a guard at the moment.”

“I wouldn’t need a guard, Lady Natasha,” Loki said. The smirk he had before slowly grew wider until the prince was wearing the brightest grin Natasha had ever seen. It almost made him look innocent and trustworthy. “Steve would be with me. I couldn’t ask for a better protector.”

Steve’s cheeks flushed red again and he looked back down at his plate. Loki laughed before returning his attention to his food. Natasha watched them for a moment while stirring her oatmeal with her spoon. By the time Loki had devoured his plate of waffles, Steve was only half done with his eggs. Loki reached his fork over and took some of Steve’s eggs, shoving them into his mouth before Steve could react. As Loki moaned over the taste, Steve laughed and smiled brightly. It was the first time Natasha had seen him look so relaxed since he was brought out of the ice, and the look in his eyes as he watched Loki eat his breakfast was one of pure admiration…one of trust.

Natasha took a bite of her oatmeal and thought about Volk.

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“You know, I really don’t appreciate being lied to,” Bruce said, laughing a little to himself as he removed his glasses. The pounding headache he received earlier was only now just beginning to recede. That coupled with the fact that he’d slept maybe a grand total of three hours since flying out from Calcutta was beginning to make Bruce feel very...irritable.

“We didn’t lie to you, Dr. Banner,” Fury said, “you just weren’t given the full truth.”

“Really?” Bruce laughed. “You’re going to argue semantics with me?”

“I’m not arguing anything, Dr. I am just stating the facts. The fact remains that you were brought in out of necessity for assisting in the Tesseract. We also felt that you were one of the few who could properly examine Mr. Laufeyjarson with the discretion we require.”

“Discretion?”

“Once you’ve completed your task with the Tesseract, you’re free to disappear to whatever corner of the world you’d like. A man who wants to stay under the radar isn’t likely to start selling SHIELD secrets.”

Bruce had to give him that one. He let out one loud, exasperated sigh and turned his attention back to the holo-screen where the pictures of his patient’s body scan were being displayed. The results were a bit confusing to Bruce, to say the least. The scan displaying his skeleton showed that, despite the man’s impressive height and athletic build, his bones were smaller than what they should be, with a density he’d seen before in patients with malnutrition. Which was odd, because if that were the case, Loki’s body would have shown evidence with organ damage, muscle pain, or at the very least swollen gums. The oddest thing that Bruce found when examining his skeletal system, though, was that there were what looked like two circular scars on the left and right side of his frontal bone of his skull.

Even stranger, the next picture was of Loki’s thermal body scan. Typically, the infrared coloring would show yellow, orange, and red at the central organs of the body, indicating their warmth; while other parts of the body would be cooler colors of green, showing how the heat dissipated. Loki’s body scan showed that the areas surrounding his major organs were purple, while the rest
varied in shades of light to dark blue, something that Bruce had only seen on cold-blooded reptiles.

The scan showing his organs was something else entirely. There was a small internal layer of fat covering his body. His heart rate was fast than any human Bruce had ever seen. His liver and spleen were enlarged, but his kidneys were smaller than they should be. Now, all of these things could have been marked up as simple oddities, if it weren’t for the fact that there was what appeared to be a fully functioning uterus being displayed on the scan.

When he first noticed it, Bruce had done a double-take. After staring at it for a moment, he thought that perhaps Loki was transgender, but that possibility was dismissed when he enhanced the scan around his genitals and saw that there was a large phallus in the place of a clitoris. Pseudohermaphroditism then? No, this wasn’t the case of an enlarged clitoris, because the scan clearly showed that, while there were no outer testicles, there was the presence of internal testicular tissue. Loki actually did have both sets of genitalia. Bruce would need to run more bloodwork, but judging from what he saw there, this could be one of those rare cases of true hermaphroditism. He was intersex… Bruce had never actually seen that before.

“So what do you make of him, Dr. Banner?”

“…I don’t really know.”

“Is he healthy or not?”

“I’m not sure what he is, truth be told.”

Bruce turned back to look at Fury, but the man’s one eye was focused on the images of the scans, as if he could find something that Bruce couldn’t. If he could make more sense of them, then more power to him, Bruce thought. After staring for a moment, Fury approached the screen and touched the scan showing the internal organs. He tapped the screen, isolating the brain and enlarged the cerebral cortex for Bruce to see. Immediately Bruce noticed what had captured Fury’s eye. According to the scan, this area of his brain had the highest level of activity. Not unusual, but something strange made Bruce squint his eyes and step closer to examine. Like Fury had done, Bruce tapped the screen and enlarged the picture, dissected it—he did love this SHIELD technology—and focused in on one particular area.

“Huh…”

“What is it?”

“The insula here,” Bruce pointed. “Does it look strange to you?”

“I’m not a brain surgeon Dr. Banner.”

“Neither am I, but it’s kind of obvious that something is off here… It’s thicker than it is in an average brain and… correct me if I’m wrong, but does it look like it’s pulsing?”

Fury’s brow furrowed in confusion and he leaned in with Bruce to get a closer look. Both men watched the screen for a moment, holding very still as if moving would somehow disrupt the data. After a long pause, they both saw it. It was small, but as they stared at the picture on the screen, they noticed a tiny pulse of the brain matter. They kept watching and saw that the pulsating was rhythmic, almost like a heartbeat.

“It’s not supposed to be doing that, is it?” Fury asked, though the tone of voice indicated that he already knew the answer.
“No,” Bruce answered. “No it’s not.”

“What exactly does this part of the brain do?”

“A few things. The insulae are supposedly the place where a person’s consciousness is stored. It’s believed to process convergent information and produce an emotional reaction for the sensory experience.”

When Fury didn’t say anything, Bruce took a breath and continued.

“It’s supposed to control emotions, basically. Aside from that, it’s supposed to control perception, self-awareness, cognitive functioning and motor control.”

“Emotions, huh?” Fury repeated. “Any clue as to why the part of his brain responsible for that is pulsating?”

“Not a damn clue,” Bruce admitted. He kept staring at the screen, watching the pulsing with a quiet fascination. The longer he watched, the more he could feel the pulse of his own headache as the rhythm fell into sync.

“Alright, what is that then?” Fury asked and pointed to the upper left side of the insula.

Bruce followed his finger to where he was pointing and saw what he was talking about. He really was out of practice if a man with one eye and no medical training was able to pick up on these things before he did. Bruce almost felt a sense of shame creeping up on him, but it was eclipsed by the curiosity of what he was seeing. There was a small discoloration on the insula.

“It looks like a lesion,” Bruce said.

“Like a tumor?”

“Hard to tell.”

“Is it harmful?”

“Can’t say,” Bruce answered. “He seemed fine in the physical. Usually brain lesions give symptoms like headaches, nausea, vision changes, and all other sorts of fun stuff. Loki didn’t mention anything like that… Aside from his teeth, I didn’t really see anything physically strange about him.”

“What about his teeth?”

“They looked like they were filed.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. Historically, a lot of cultures used to practice body modification with their teeth. Ancient Mayans used to sharpen their teeth to distinguish the classes, and the Wapare in Africa would sharpen theirs to look like sharks.”

“Sort of how a bunch of people reading Anne Rice novels suddenly decide to sharpen their incisors,” Fury added.

“Pretty much,” Bruce nodded. “A lot of people do it nowadays for cosmetic reasons, to straighten them out.”
“How could you tell with him?”

“Because they were all filed down to the same length, even the incisors. No one’s teeth are naturally that aligned... I know it sounds strange, but given everything else that I’ve seen on this guys, it looks like at some point, all of his teeth were filed down from points into what he has now.”

“I see.”

“...So are you going to tell me now what the hell is up with this guy?”

“Mr. Laufeyjarson is not your main concern, Dr. Banner.”

“You made him my concern when he became my patient. I have the right to know what the hell it is I’m dealing with here, because this,” he pointed at the data on the screen, “is not a natural human.”

“No, it’s not.”

A pregnant pause and then, “So what is he? One of the mutant types that have been coming out of the woods lately?”

“...This isn’t the first visit that Mr. Laufeyjarson has made to our neck of the woods. His presence here has showed us that we’re not alone, and given what he can do, we’re possibly outgunned.”

“...He’s not a mutant, is he?”

“No.”

“So not a human and not a mutant. That only leaves one other option.”

Fury gave him a blank stare. Bruce gave a slight nod and tried to process the information.... An alien. He had met with, performed a physical on, and was now studying the physiology of an alien. That was not what he was expecting when he boarded that plane with Maria Hill and decided to re-enter the world he once knew.

“Why did you need me to look at him?”

“We need you first and foremost for the Tesseract, but it’s connected with Laufeyjarson as well. Agent Romanoff informed you of the gamma radiation levels in his blood?” Bruce nodded. “We’ll know more when the lab comes back with his bloodwork, but according to Howard Stark’s old research the levels he noted in Laufeyjarson were similar to the Tesseract.”

“Could be coincidental.”

“They come from the same place... Kind of rules out coincidence.”

“So why bring me in? I saw that you had Tony Stark—”

“Stark doesn’t have the experience that you do with gamma radiation. He also doesn’t know how to follow orders.”

“Experience,” Bruce laughed. “Is that what you call it?”

“Dr. Banner,” Fury said his name slowly and firmly, trying to stress the seriousness of the situation. “The Tesseract is more powerful than any other energy source than we’ve ever
encountered before. It can do a lot of good, or it can do a lot of harm. The moment Laufeyjarson arrived on this planet, the Tesseract, after years of dormancy, began to become unstable… I don’t find the two a coincidence. I need you to study both, find their connection, and if possible find a way to control it.”

“Control it?” That was laughable, Bruce though. He couldn’t even control himself the majority of the time. How could he be expected to control two obviously unstable sources of power? “What are you asking me to do, Director Fury?”

“I’m asking you to do what needs to be done.”

“And what’s that, huh?” Bruce asked. The headache that was receding was coming back now two-fold. That wasn’t the worst of it, though. Just like in the exam room, he could feel the Other Guy inside of him stirring. Something about this whole situation was making the Other Guy become restless, irritable. A dangerous combination for everyone involved.

“What do you expect me to do, Director? Strap him down on the table, open him up, and see exactly what makes him tick?” Bruce’s voice lowered down to a growl by the last word. Fury noticed. Like Agent Romanoff before, his hand was slowly moving towards his hip where he kept the gun hidden beneath his trench coat.

“You seemed to be so curious about what was going on in his head. Do you want me to cut out his brain and put it on your desk so you can see it up close? Or, no… You’re more curious about the gamma radiation in his blood. I guess since you can’t get it from me, it would just be easier to bleed him out, then you have all you need to create another Captain America or another Abomination.”

Bruce’s glasses broke in his hand and Fury grabbed his gun.

“Dr. Banner!” Fury snapped.

Bruce’s eyes snapped up to him as he took a couple of deep breaths to steady himself. He didn’t know where that came from. It wasn’t like him to get worked up so easily like this. Not after all that he’s gone through to ensure that he could control himself. The Other Guy wasn’t happy, though, and Bruce could feel him deep inside. With every pulse of his headache, he could feel the Other Guy stirring, trying to claw his way out… It was the same as when he was in that room with Loki. There was some kind of…recognition. A pull that called to the Other Guy. Bruce didn’t know what it was, but he didn’t like it.

“I…I’m sorry,” Bruce said, taking another deep breath. “I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

“Are you calm, Dr. Banner?”

“As much as I can be, given that you’re still pointing your gun at me.”

Fury nodded, but didn’t lower the weapon. Bruce didn’t say anything else about it. If it made him feel better, like he had more control over the situation, then Bruce would allow it. Besides, it’s not as if a single bullet would have any effect on him. Bruce would know… He had tried.

Fury stared Bruce down for another full three minutes, watching his movements until he was sure that Banner had control of himself before he began to lower the weapon. He didn’t put it back in its holster, though. Seeing that was the best he was going to get, Bruce forced a weak smile and nodded to the Director.

“We really do need your help, Dr. Banner,” Fury said after a moment. “We have no intention of
harming anyone, but I will do whatever needs to be done to ensure the safety of this world and its people… I don’t want to hurt Laufeyjarson, but the world is filling up with people and powers that can’t be matched, that can’t be controlled.”

*People like me.* Bruce thought.

“I just want to know if he’s a threat,” Fury finished.

“And if he is?”

“Then I’ll do what needs to be done.”

“…And if I’m a threat.”

“The same thing.”

Bruce took another deep breath, while inside his skull felt like it was about to split apart from the force of his pounding headache.

“…I’ll need to talk to him again,” Bruce said with a loud sigh. “This time I’ll need to get a clearer idea of his medical history and physiology. There are some questions that only he can answer about a few things, specifically about his insulae. Maybe we can find out why it’s pulsating and why it has the lesion.”

“Time is a bit of a factor with the Tesseract at the moment. Can it wait?”

“If you want to understand their connection, then I’ll need to find out all I can about him. Is the Tesseract critical?”

“Stark and Dr. Selvig managed to stabilize it for the time being, but they’re not sure how long it will hold. Since Stark is indispose for the rest of the evening, you’re all we’ve got.”

“Yeah, that was…interesting,” Bruce nodded. “I’ll help Selvig down in the lab, but I want to talk to Loki first thing tomorrow.”

“That can be arranged. Just know, Dr. Banner, that no one in the lab—not Selvig or Stark—are to know about Laufeyjarson. And in turn, Laufeyjarson doesn’t find out about the Tesseract. Understand?”

“Got it…What exactly about this guy has you so afraid?”

“I suppose you’ll find that out tomorrow.”

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After devouring three stacks of waffles, Loki asked for some form of entertainment. He may have been a guest to these people, but he was still a prince, and was thus accustomed to giving demands. He’d asked the Lady Natasha if the SHIELD facilities possessed a library, but she informed him that they did not. It was not cost effective, she had said, as many agents of SHIELD only remained on the grounds part time, and while they were there, they didn’t have much down-time for reading. When Steve asked exactly what people did there for fun, she took them to a floor in the facility, where there was something called a game room, a gymnasium, a pool, and a training area.

Steve had stayed on Loki’s heels the whole time like Fenrir. Both Loki and Lady Natasha offered Steve the option of leaving the facility for a while and collect his things from his home if he
wished, but Steve politely declined. He didn’t want to leave Loki alone. In some sense, Loki appreciated the concern, but if it continued for too long, he would begin to find it bothersome. Not just because the man’s attachment to him would disrupt his plans, but because it reminded him too much of his situation in Asgard. Little Loki must never wander out of his nurse’s sight. He must never be too far from his chaperones. Little Loki is small, frail and ergi. Something may happen to him if he were not guarded. How good of Prince Thor to keep his betrothed company, he must care for him so dearly…It drove Loki nearly insane once before. He was not going to put himself through that again.

It was only when they reached the gymnasium that Steve detached himself from Loki in order to look around. Natasha walked him around the room, explaining the uses and functions of the various equipment, most of which Steve responded to with a disbelieving look. To be fair, Loki didn’t see the point in a machine that has a person run in place either. If one wanted to run, why wouldn’t they do so outdoors? Midgardians were confusing. Steve did, however, become interested in the weights that were standing in one portion of the room, as well as the large bag dangling from the ceiling. When Loki gave it an experimental touch, he noted how heavy and thick the bag was. Steve demonstrated its use for him by giving it a hard punch, making it swing from the chain holding it. After the first punch, though, Steve gave another, and another, and another, until he began to focus all of his energy into punching it as hard as he could. Loki left him to his devices.

That is when Natasha showed him the special training area. In the room next to the gymnasium was a room almost the size of the feasting hall in Asgard. The walls were grey and covered in a foam material; to absorb the sound, Natasha explained. The floors were a thin blue mat material, which sunk a little under the weight of Loki’s feet.

“What exactly is this room for?” Loki asked.

“Technically it’s a training room, but most new agents are trained at the academy. A lot of the agents here just come here for a tune-up once in a while or if they feel like blowing off steam.”

“They practice their combat in here? Seems a bit gloomy,” Loki commented, looking around the darkened area. “In Asgard all of the training takes place in outdoors or in an open arena.”

“Spend a lot of time in those?”

“Hardly,” Loki laughed. “I was not allowed to train with the warriors of Asgard. I would not have been trained at all if Odin had his way… It would not have been proper for the future queen of Asgard to be seen sweating and pawing at men who were not my betrothed.”

Those were Odin’s words, not Loki’s. He remembered the day he went to them, head down and the picture of humility, begging for the chance to become trained in the art of combat. Odin had thought that the female side of Loki’s nature would turn him into some kind of animal in heat if he came into close contact with grunting, sweating males. Fighting was no different to rutting for a Jotun, he had said. Loki wondered exactly where Odin gained that comparison, but kept it to himself.

“So how did you learn to fight? If you weren’t allowed to train with anyone else, it doesn’t seem like you’d get much practice.”

“Queen Frigga took pity on me and allowed me a private tutor.” Loki smiled as he thought about Freyja. He thought of her honey colored hair, pale skin, and ice blue eyes, which always looked so kindly upon Loki. He had not thought about Freyja in some time… He wondered if she ever thought of him.
“I was with her for a few years before she was sent away. Since she left, I was forced to study on my own. I’ve made do, though.”

“What did you train with?”

“The spear and throwing knives were our specialty, but she also taught me defensive spells… She taught me a lot of my basic magic, actually,” Loki smiled. He never realized how much he missed her.

“Huh,” Natasha said. “For a space Viking that seems pretty tame. I would have guessed long-swords, axes, war hammers, and bow-and-arrows.”

Loki made a tsk noise and shook his head. “Archery was always considered beneath the Aesir. It is a long-range weapon, so not worthy of a glorious combat. The same is for the spear and knives, which is why I was allowed to use them. In Asgard, a warrior can only prove himself in combat if he’s willing to face his foe head-on with the possibility of immediate death. To use a weapon that requires distance shows fear of death, therefore they’re considered a coward’s weapons… Only women and ergis are allowed to use them.”

“Huh…” she said again, looking off thoughtfully into the distance. After a moment she looked back to Loki, her features remaining stoic. “Interesting logic. The spear is one of the oldest and most effective weapons, and archery takes a lot of skill. You’d think there would be a bit more respect in it.”

“My feelings as well, but the Aesir tend to prize brute strength over skill.”

“Were you any good?”

“I believe I was,” Loki said. He did think that he possessed some high skill level, but he’d never truly had the combat experience to test it out. The most practice he was allowed on someone else, aside from Freyja, was when he was fending off the advances of Thor.

Natasha nodded to Loki, then began to remove her jacket. Loki watched her, confused as she toed off her shoes next. Once she was finished, she walked off to the left side of the room, where metal containers were lining the walls. She opened one, looked through for a moment, and then reached in to grab something. When she turned back, Loki saw that she was holding a long wooden staff in each hand. She raised a brow at him and a smile broke out onto Loki’s face. Oh, he liked this woman.

Taking a cue from her, Loki took off his shoes and allowed himself to get a feel for the floor, testing the resistance of the mat material. When satisfied, he walked up to her and she threw one of the staffs out to him. He caught it mid-air and turned it in his hand, getting a feel for the weight and the balance. It was a bit longer than the one he brought with him and the ones he practiced with in Asgard, but it would do.

Once he was ready, they both walked to the center of the room. Like Loki, she knew to face him with her side turned. Without a shield, it was the safer pose, making the target smaller to hit. They both took a defensive stance and let out a deep breath. Loki gripped the staff firmly, his left hand towards the top and right hand closest to himself, just as Freyja taught him. Natasha looked to him and Loki nodded, signaling he was ready.

For a long moment, neither Loki nor Natasha moved, each one waiting for the other to make the first move. Never rush in, Freyja had taught him. Always take your time, assess your opponent and weigh your options. It was quite hard to assess Natasha, though, when she was busy sizing him up.
as well. Finally, she made a forward thrust. Loki blocked it easily enough and thrust his staff to strike her chest, but she turned out of the way, spinning her staff in her hands. She kept spinning it, rotating her wrists to keep the staff moving, hoping to draw Loki’s eye and distract him. Freyja had warned him about that before, and knocked Loki on his ass many times when he forgot the lesson. So when she stopped spinning the staff and swung it at him, Loki was able to duck under the strike and brought his own staff up to hit her stomach. She was quick, though, and brought the staff down to block him.

Loki rolled away from her staff onto his feet, but facing away from her. When she advanced on him, he turned the staff in his hands as Freyja had taught him, turned, and brought the staff swinging down over his shoulder. Under normal circumstances, that move would have struck its intended target, wounding them if not incapacitating them completely. Natasha was not a normal opponent, though. As soon as she saw Loki bring the staff around, she back-flipped out of the range of the weapon. Loki tried to follow her by holding the staff by the edge and spinning to catch her in the circumference, but again she ducked out of the way. When Loki brought the staff to rest over the back of his shoulders, she was quick to grab it with one hand, hoping to pull it from him.

Loki almost lost his balance, but he turned the staff in her hand against her thumb and took a retreating step. She lost her grip, but knelt down and thrust the spear twice at him. It was all Loki could do to block. As she remained kneeling, he brought the staff down to strike her, but Natasha stood and stepped back out of range. In the brief second that Loki was bent over from his strike, Natasha managed to jump with her feet landing on his back. Before Loki could even fully straighten himself, she used him as a platform to jump, flip in the air, and hit the ground in a tumble away from him. Loki’s jaw dropped from pure amazement as she turned back, twirling twice and spinning her staff over her shoulders.

“I thought you said you were good?” She taunted. “You should have hit me by now.”

“It’s not for lack of trying, Lady Natasha,” Loki replied. When Natasha spun once again with her staff, Loki assumed she was going to try to strike him again. He bent back and brought swung the staff in a circular motion, blocking her strike again.

“You’re more skilled than anyone I’ve seen with a spear in Asgard.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Natasha said. She thrust her staff out in three quick successions, each of which had Loki taking a retreating step. Amateur mistake. Freyja would be so displeased if she saw it.

“You should.”

She really should, Loki thought. Loki hadn’t seen many of the women on Asgard train, but he had always seen Sif whenever she fought with Thor. Lady Sif was a terrific warrior, there was no doubt, but she fought in the same manner as her shield-brothers; head-on. The point of the spear was to keep an enemy at a distance, but Sif would always rush into the combat. Like Thor and their idiotic friends, she wanted to be the one to make the first strike, to establish a sense of dominance early in her battle. Too often it left her vulnerable to an opponent’s blow, leaving her bruised. She’d grown tougher from the experience and knew how to take a blow, and truly, she was one of the greatest fighters Asgard had to offer. The problem was, though, that one day she will have to face an opponent stronger and larger than her, and she will still rush head in… Natasha, though, knew how to use the staff as an extension of her own arm. She knew how to use it in sync with her body, the way Freyja and the Valkyries did, so that she could maintain distance from her foe and still manage to be lethal. Natasha was amazing…Unfortunately, if she were in Asgard, she would be considered as cowardly as Loki.
They continued their spar, each swinging, spinning, and thrusting their staffs at each other, but never able to land a blow. Loki had gotten close. He tried to emulate her moves and use his own agility with the staff. He stood the staff straight, held on and swung his body around to strike her with his foot. She managed to duck at the last second, narrowly avoiding a foot to the face, but she looked impressed by the move. She jumped and flipped, using her body as swiftly as she could to try to catch him unawares. Loki managed to keep up with her movements and did his best to block her.

“You don’t fight like any warrior I’ve seen before,” he told her as she tried to swing the staff at his legs. He jumped back, flipping in the air, and landed low so that he could thrust his staff at her. She did a backwards aerial flip, kicking his weapon out of the way in the process.

“I was trained in a lot of different cultural fighting styles. I have to adapt to the situation.”

“You make a formidable weapon then.”

“That was the purpose.” She put the staff behind her shoulders and did another aerial kick towards him, swinging the staff around as she landed. This time, Loki ran forward and front flipped over her.

“Have you seen a lot of warriors fight?” She asked when she turned to face him, just in time to block his blow.

“I’ve seen many. Whenever I traveled here, I would always try to get to know the people of wherever I landed. I’ve mortals throwing stones at one another, the campaigns of the tribes of Rome, the iron swords and axes of the Gaulish wars, spear fighting of the islands in your Pacific, and the chaos of your current warfare with your guns and tanks… The last one is how I came to know the captain.”

He turned the staff vertical to block her.

“I read the file,” she said. “That was your first time here, right? Must have been pretty scary.”

“It was,” Loki nodded. He ducked back when she swung at him again.

“You probably weren’t expecting to see him again, were you?”

“Most certainly not,” Loki laughed. He got low and swung at her feet, but she jumped over the staff each time.

When she landed, she swung out her leg to kick him, but Loki rolled out of the way. “You said you couldn’t control when you came, though. So he couldn’t have been the first person that you ran into twice.”

“I’ve met many people. It is difficult to keep them all in my memory.”

“Some of the must stick out.”

They both thrust their staffs at the same time, hitting each other with a loud clanking sound.

“There was one little boy I met in Antium. Sweet child, obsessed with his father’s imperial uniform and his sister Julia. We didn’t know each other long, but on another visit to Rome at a later time, I found him commanding an army to attack the sea.”

“Caligula,” Natasha said. “Of course you would know Caligula.”
“I understood that he was emperor. Was he an important figure here?”

“He made a name for himself, I’ll just leave it at that,” she said. She kept the staff tucked under one arm and ran at him. She jumped in the air, turning and extending a leg forward. Instead of jumping back, Loki tumbled quickly under her. When she landed, he tried to swing his leg out to knock her of balance, but he was just out of reach.

“Did you meet anybody else interesting? Any kings, queens, or dictators?”

“A few kings, after my friend and I lied our way into their court,” he admitted. “It is hard to say about the dictators. After almost being burned at a stake, I tried to keep a low profile.”

Loki began twirling his staff in his hands the way she had before and walked towards her. She didn’t back away, so when Loki turned to gain inertia to bring his staff down, he was taken by surprise when she raised her weapon. The clang of the wood rang loudly in his ears and she used her force to push him back.

“So how did you end up meeting Stark?”

“Howard?”

“The other one,” she corrected. Natasha did another aerial, turned when she landed and brought the staff down with enough force to smash his skull in. Loki heard the weapon cut through the air next to his ear as he just barely managed to get out of the way.

“Tony Stark,” she went on. “We saw him upstairs. He seemed like he recognized you.”

Ah… so that’s what this was, Loki thought with a bit of disappointment. Shame. He was enjoying this and he liked this woman.

“He may have recognized me, but I don’t remember him,” he lied. “I knew Howard—a man that pompous is hard to forget—but if I met the son, it must have been under very underwhelming circumstances.”

“Strange.”

“I’m nearly a thousand years old, Lady Natasha, and the lives of Midgardians are like that of a fruit fly to my kind. You’ll have to forgive me if I cannot remember all who have ever crossed my path.”

Taking a risk, Loki attempted his own aerial kick. He landed successfully and brought his staff down, but he must have been too slow, because all Natasha had to do was side-step away from it.

“Does that mean you’ll forget me too?” She asked, giving Loki a coy look. To anyone else it may have seemed genuine.

Loki played along and gave her a mischievous smile. “No, you I will remember. I always remember the ones I like.”

“Does that mean you liked Howard after all?”

“Norns no,” Loki scoffed. “I only knew the man a short time, but he was loud, crass, obnoxious, and loved the sound of his own voice.”

“Like father, like son then,” Natasha said. “Stark loves the sound of his own voice.”
“That he does,” Loki smiled. Since seeing the man recognize him and hearing his name, more of that night was beginning to come back to him. He didn’t remember their conversations or anything important. He just remembered that they danced, they talked for hours, and then they kissed… Loki smiled a little brighter when memories of that kiss began to come back to him.

Natasha suddenly came at him, staff spinning wildly in the air towards him. When she got close enough, Loki ducked back and raised his staff to block her. When he did, though, she grabbed his staff again. He tried to turn it in her hand and step back again, but this time she held strong. He thrust forward and pulled back quickly, but she held on tight. Loki was so distracted that he wasn’t aware of what she was doing.

The hand that wasn’t holding the staff reached out and grabbed his. Loki had just enough time to flash his eyes to his wrist when she turned it, twisting his arm. She dropped her staff and the next thing Loki knew, she was turning herself in the air. She wrapped her legs around his neck and used the force of it to bring him down, rolling him out on his back. He landed on the ground with his arm twisted at an uncomfortable angle and trapped in her grasp, while her legs tightened around his neck, attempting to choke him… Loki can honestly say he had not been expecting that.

Loki tried to wriggle free, but she kept a tight hold. Unusually tight for a mortal her size. The best Loki could manage was to move his hand between her leg and his neck, so that she wasn’t squeezing his trachea. Once he had the room, he began to laugh.

“In Asgard, that would be considered cheating.”

“You’re not in Asgard anymore, and on Earth, this is called winning a fight.”

“Then I daresay that you’ve beaten me, Lady Natasha.”

“No comment about how on Asgard it’s not considered warrior-like to lose to a woman?”

“As you said, I’m not in Asgard. And there is no shame in losing to a woman who is as skilled as you are.”

Natasha smiled slightly and let him go. With the pressure off, Loki took a deep breath of air and rolled his shoulder as he sat up. He liked her style of fighting. Perhaps if he was going to have to be here long, he could spar with her again. Loki moved to sit up when suddenly there was a staff pressed under his chin. He looked up to see Natasha standing over him, staff in hand and ready to deliver a final killing blow. Loki tensed himself, waiting for her last strike.

Then just as suddenly, a body slammed into Natasha, knocking her down to the floor. Loki blinked in surprise and looked to see that Steve was on top of Natasha, pinning her down to the floor. Natasha was struggling to get him off, but Steve had his full weight on her waist and her arms pinned down by his super-strength. Loki snapped out of his shock, got up and ran over to pull him off. Steve shook him off.

“Get down!” He screamed.

“Captain Rogers—” Natasha tried to get his attention.

“Shut up!” He screamed in her face, making both her and Loki jump from the force of it.

“Steve!” Loki tried.

“Get down!” He screamed again.
Loki tried to grab his shoulder again, but once more Steve shook him off.

“Bucky, get down!”

Bucky?

Loki grabbed him a third time, this time managing to get a firm hold. Steve may be strong, but Loki was stronger. He held tight to the captain’s shoulder and threw him off of Natasha. She was quick to recover as she sat up, watching Steve. The captain had a crazed, faraway look in his eyes as he looked around nervously. His chest was heaving and his fists were balled so tight that they were turning red.

“Captain Rogers,” Natasha said slowly.

“Steve!” Loki tried. Still the captain didn’t register their voices.


She got up and very slowly approached Steve. She kept her hands out and at her sides, letting Steve see them as she walked closer. When she got close enough, she knelt down so that they were at eye-level.

“Captain Rogers,” she said slowly. “Steve… You’re safe now. You’re in SHIELD… You’re with me and Loki. We’re all safe. No one is going to hurt you.”

She repeated those words, over and over again for a full five minutes. Loki stood by them nervously, anxious that he was going to attack her again. As the minutes passed, though, he saw that Steve was slowly beginning to relax, his fists loosening and breathing slowing down. Loki didn’t feel they were safe, though, until Steve’s eyes came back into focus.

“Steve,” Natasha said his name and this time he looked at her. “Steve, do you know where you are?”

“…Yeah,” he said in a whisper.

“Can you tell me where?”

“I… I’m in SHIELD.”

“Do you know who you’re with?”

“You and… Loki? Where’s Loki?” He sounded a little panicked, but Natasha was quick to grab Loki’s wrist and pull him towards them.

“Loki is right here, Steve. He’s right here and we’re all safe.”

“Safe,” he repeated. “We’re all safe…”

Another few minutes passed. Natasha didn’t speak again and Loki didn’t know enough of what was going on to say anything. Steve closed his eyes and focused on his breathing, occasionally mumbling the word ‘safe’. Finally, though, he let out a deep breath and opened his eyes.

“A-Agent Romanoff, I’m so sorry,” he apologized lowly.

“It’s alright, Steve. You’re ok… Do you think you can stand?”
“Yeah,” he nodded. Steve slowly began to stand up, but kept his eyes focused down on the floor. “I’m so sorry,” he said again. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“It’s alright… Do you want Loki to take you back to your room?”

Steve looked up at the mention of Loki’s name. He sought out Loki’s gaze and held it. He tried to smile weakly and reassure his friend that he was alright, but Loki was just so confused as to what had transpired that he couldn’t return the gesture. He felt guilty afterwards, though, when Steve’s eyes fell and he backed away.

“…No,” he shook his head. “No… I- I just. I need to go… for a while.”

“Steve I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Loki said.

“No, it’s ok,” Natasha said. “If you need to be alone, Steve, that’s ok. Loki and I will be right here.”

“I-I’m sorry,” he said again.

Loki watched as Steve retreated from the room, shaking his head the whole way out. Loki didn’t see him again for the rest of the day.

***

Tony was going crazy alone in his room. He’d been stuck in there, looking at the same blank walls since the agents escorted him out of the medical bay. His chest was sore and stinging like a mother-bitch, but he was trying to make do with the salve that the doctor had given him. The best the thing did was cool his burning skin and help make him numb to the pain, but looking at his charred flesh circling around his arc reactor made him feel queasy. He hoped to God that it didn’t get infected. The last thing he needed was gross bacteria and puss forming around the metal in his chest and possibly spreading to his heart. He didn’t think that Pepper would be willing to help him clean out the chest cavity again.

Coulson was true to his word about keeping agents posted at his door at all times. An hour after being brought back into the room, Tony had gotten restless and poked his head out the door with the intention of looking around for a bit. As soon as he took one step out the door, though, some six-foot-two, GQ model looking agent pushed him back inside and threatened to snap his neck if he tried again. This place really needed to work on their bedside manner. Tony had tried listening at the door to see if anyone was still out there, but every once in a while he could hear the sound of footsteps or someone addressing his guards. After three hours, he gave up.

To pass the time, Tony attempted to watch the television in the room, but that grew boring after a while. Everything that was on was either the news, some bullshit drama marketed to teenage girls, reality shows, or a shitty Jennifer Aniston movie on HBO. Maybe if he held on long enough Game of Thrones would come on, but Tony didn’t have the attention span for that. Instead to kill time, he took apart the clock radio that SHIELD so kindly provided and used the parts to try to create a toy robot. Of course, making his own personal Transformer was not his ideal way to spend the day, but if he was going to be kept prisoner—and no one wanted to supply him with some whiskey—then he needed to keep his mind busy. The only downside was that taking apart the clock meant that he couldn’t tell the time.

Three to four in the morning. That was the window that JARVIS had given him. Not that he could confirm with JARVIS at the moment. Coulson had taken his watch and did a sweep of his room, taking his cufflinks, tie pins, laptop and even his shoes. Not that there was anything in the shoes,
but they were his custom made Louis Vuitton Stingrays. That shit was expensive, and he had the feeling that he wasn’t going to be getting them back any time soon. The only solace he found was that everything else they took that was connected to JARVIS all ran on a biometric scan. If anybody but Tony touched them, then all data would be wiped clean. The same applied to the case containing the MK XLII. Tony was surprised to find that was still there when he returned… Likely because JARVIS camouflaged the case to look like a normal suitcase. He got the idea from watching classic episodes of Doctor Who and hearing about the TARDIS’ chameleon circuit. JARVIS had thought it would be a good idea—he was starting to suspect that JARVIS had a little crush—and applied it to the emergency cases for the suit.

Tony checked the TV again and flipped it to the HBO channel. He was delightfully surprised when he saw that some cheesy prison themed lesbian porn was playing. From what it looked like it was some kind of rip off of Orange is the New Black if the wild haired girl with the heavy Brooklyn accent and the older woman in the bright red wig speaking broken Russian were any indication.

Tony left it on and turned the volume up to an unholy level. It wasn’t so much that he was pleased that the porn was on—don’t get him wrong, it looked hot as hell and they didn’t even need to change Pornstache’s nickname—but porn didn’t come on cable until at least after three in the morning.

With the sounds of fake moans and screams in the background, Tony reached under the bed and grabbed the MK XLII case. Knowing that there were security cams in the room, Tony took the case into the adjacent bathroom and closed the door behind him. He would just have to hope that SHIELD respected privacy in this of all places. Just to be safe, though, he turned on the shower to the hottest setting and waited until the mirror began to fog up before he sat down and opened the case. Tony dumped out all of the clothes he put in there for show and dug around until he found the mechanical bracelets that connected to the armor. He put them on, pressed the button in the case, and held them up to be scanned. Within moments, JARVIS was online.

“Good morning, Master Stark. It seems that you’ve had a shockingly productive day.”

Did JARVIS just make a pun at his expense?

“I will donate you to a city college, JARV, I swear,” he whispered.

“I apologize for any offense, sir, but you couldn’t possibly allow me to pass that one up.”

“Why did I make you British and snarky?”

“An addiction to Fawlty Towers would be my guess, sir.”

“Oh yeah,” Tony smiled. “I loved that show. What time is it, buddy?”

“Just after 3:15 a.m., sir. My systems show that there are at least four security cameras in your sleeping quarters, but you were right to assume there would be none in here.”

“Well I am a genius, JARV.”

“So you like to remind me.”

“How is the main security?”

“There are only two agents at the main monitors right now. One being assigned to watch a single room containing an unspecified person, and the other one appears to be playing Galaga.”

“Thought we wouldn’t notice, but we did,” Tony said. “Are you still hooked into their systems?”
“After your incident in the medical bay this morning, Director Fury and Agent Coulson attempted to flush me out, but I managed to conceal myself in their budgetary files, and you were correct, sir. SHIELD is undergoing a budget-cut for their research and analysis departments.”

“I knew it. They took a bunch of my stuff earlier, some of the things that I used to talk to you. Did they find you on anything?”

“An Agent Fitz came close to discovering me in your watch this afternoon, but the failsafe you had programmed proved effective. At the moment, SHIELD does not have evidence of your snooping.”

“It’s not snooping,” Tony replied. “It’s just a healthy curiosity. I don’t like getting into bed with people I don’t know are clean.”

“You never seemed to have much of a problem with it before, sir.”

“Stop making jokes about my personal life and give me what I need, JARVIS,” Tony sighed. He blamed Pepper for that. He’d caught her more than once chatting with JARVIS about Tony’s sex life over a glass of wine. Now the AI took the initiative to tease Tony whenever he could.

“Right away, sir.”

JARVIS began to list off what he’d found in SHIELD’s files on the Tesseract. A lot of it was what Tony had already been briefed on; discovered and kept in Norway, taken by HYDRA, ocean, Howard, infinite energy, yada, yada, yada. All of it seemed pretty routine stuff, but JARVIS did manage to find something regarding the Tesseract called Phase 2. The firewalls around that one were pretty strong, so in order for JARVIS to get through them discreetly, it was going to take at least a week. Tony groaned at the information, but it seemed the safer route than caught again. Fury already didn’t like him and Coulson was likely going to be out for blood if he had to deal with him again…Plus, Tony really didn’t want to be tased again.

“You mentioned a subcategory for the doom cube earlier. Was it about Phase 2?”

“No, I don’t believe so, sir. The dates entered for the subcategory coincide with some of the earliest for the Tesseract. Although, it appears that the file was recently opened in the last two days. Phase 2 has only been mentioned within the past two years. I will find more on that subject later, but for the other, I don’t believe I will be able to access the files directly.”

“You’re scaring me, JARV,” he said. “The day you can’t do something is the day I give up drinking.”

“Your liver will rejoice with the news, sir. As I mentioned before, though, sir, I was able to pull a little information and cross-reference with what I found about the Tesseract. The power surge from gamma radiations are mentioned in both, but in some instances are referred to as seidr.”

“So what is that? Some term they developed to talk about gamma?”

“I researched the word, sir, and seidr is an Old Norse term for sorcery and magic. It could possibly be a codename, but given that the Tesseract was prone to emitting bursts of energy, it is likely that the first discovered the cube in Norway considered it to carry magical properties. This could also apply to the topic of the subcategory as well.”

Makes sense, Tony thought. If people in the olden days thought that a volcano meant that the gods were angry, then it’s likely that they attributed a form of science they didn’t understand to magic. The term seemed to be a bit outdated, though, especially for SHIELD.
“Anything else I should know about? Are they planning to weaponize this thing, or do they have any idea why it’s acting so volatile?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have those specific answers, sir. There were a few markers indicating other periods when it began to act disruptively under SHIELD custody. The earliest was in the late 1940s, several times in the 1960s, twice in the 1980s, once in the early 1990s, and several time within the past five years… Sir, there appears to be some sort of acronym connected to these incidents. L.O.K.I”

“L.O.K.I,” Tony repeated. Something about that felt like it should ring a bell. He said it again, pronouncing it ‘look-eey.’

“What the hell is a L.O.K.I?” He asked himself.

“What is a who.”

Tony nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound of a new voice in the room. The shock of it was enough to cause him to fall off of his seat on the toilet and land hard on his ass. When he looked up, there was a tall young man standing over him, looking down at him with a look in his eyes that could only mean trouble.

“Jesus Christ!” Tony exclaimed, putting his hand over the reactor on his chest, just above his heart.

“Hardly,” the young man replied.

“Who the fuck are you?” Tony asked, panting his breath. Seriously, the people at this facility were trying to send him to an early grave… Ok, a middle-aged grave, but still too soon for Tony.

“You don’t remember?” The man asked.

Tony took a moment to examine him from his position on the floor and tried think back. The guy had unnaturally pale skin, a sharp angular face—like he could cut diamonds on those cheekbones—pink, thin lips, long black hair, and strikingly green eyes. He wasn’t wearing the typical SHIELD uniform, but rather a pair of tight leather trousers and an open neck green shirt. Tony thought back and couldn’t quite place it. When the man began to narrow his eyes at him, it came back to Tony.

“Shit,” he groaned. “You’re the guy who was with Romanoff and Captain America earlier. Agent… I didn’t get your name. Sorry.”

Although Tony was sure that’s the person he saw earlier, his answer didn’t seem to appease the man. Those finely sculpted brows furrowed and his lips turned down in a slight frown. Tony wasn’t sure exactly what to do, so he slowly reached out and closed his case.

“So…am I in trouble now?” He asked, but no answer was given. “Did Coulson send you down here to see where I was hiding my tech? Wait, how did you even get in here?”

The man made a tsk noise and turned his head away. “There is no place where I cannot enter undetected.”

“Yeah, I’m sure that looks great on a resume. Listen, is there any chance that you can keep this between the two of us? I wasn’t snooping, so Coulson doesn’t have to know about this… How well do they pay you here? Judging by the wear on that shirt, I’m guessing it’s not much. I can triple your yearly salary in about three seconds if you’re willing to let this go.”
“I did not come here for your measly offerings, Stark,” the man said. “I came simply out of curiosity. To see if you remembered. It appears that mortal minds are fickle… Shame.”

“…I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Tony said, completely confused. He wondered if he screamed right now if Agent Ridiculously-Photogenic could get in here before this guy could kill him…If he could hear his screaming over the porn playing in the next room. Fuck!

Cheekbones turned his head to look back at him, with a haughty look in his eyes that Tony had only seen in supermodel circles.

“You truly don’t remember?” He asked again. All Tony could give him was a shake of his head. “You were different then, much younger.

Cheekbones knelt down on the floor so that he was eye-level with Tony. He stared into Tony’s eyes and, as much as he wanted to, he couldn’t look away. They were just so bright, green, and hypnotic, like he was staring into his soul. Tony didn’t even notice the man’s hand reaching out to him until he felt it touch his chest, right on the arc reactor.

“You didn’t have this strange device then. You seemed…I don’t what to say happier, but less burdened back then.”

“…Ok,” Tony took a deep breath. “It’s three in the morning. I have been tased, held captive all day, and haven’t slept in almost forty-eight hours. If you’re trying to get me somewhere, you’re going to have to lead me by the hand, because otherwise I have no fucking clue what you’re talking about.”

The man mumbled something and rolled his eyes. When he was done, he fixed Tony with a hard look. “I’m a bit fuzzy on all of the details, so if you do remember something in that small brain of yours, do speak up… The year was—I believe—1991. It was dark, there was music, dancing, and drinking—”

“That pretty much sums up my life for the last twenty years,” Tony interrupted. “You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“For Norns sake,” he groaned. “Think… I was dancing with someone, you pulled me away.”

Still wasn’t ringing a bell for Tony. He did try to think, though. 1991? He found that a bit hard to believe. This guy looked at most twenty-four years old. He would have been a baby when Tony was in his twenties…Still, there was something about this guy that seemed familiar. He had thought the same back in the medical bay before he was tased. Something about him, particularly his eyes, looked familiar.

“I believe you called me…beautiful, but hopeless, if I’m remembering correctly. You laughed at my ignorance of your world… I am Loki.”

Loki. Loki. Loki…Tony searched his memory—a hard thing to do considering that years of alcohol had erased a few selective memories. As he stared at the man, though, something was beginning to come back to him. Green eyes… Those eyes that caught his attention in a dark, crowded bar. Those eyes that lit up when he laughed at Tony’s dumb jokes and advances. Those eyes that closed when he leaned in for a kiss…

Tony’s eyes widened so much that he was sure his eyebrows were touching his hairline. “Holy fucking shit!”

Cheekbones’—Loki—face broke out into a wide grin, his smile lighting up all of his features and
making those green eyes shine like emeralds. Tony had seen that smile before. Tony had seen that smile and fell mildly in love with it nearly twenty-five years ago. The only problem was, in all that time, that smile and the person wearing it hadn’t aged a single day.

“Holy fucking shit,” he said again, mouth open and gaping. It couldn’t be. It just wasn’t fucking possible. There was just no way that this was the guy.

“Go on. Worship me, mortal.”

…This was the guy.

“Loki,” Tony whispered his name. Or do I have to call you ‘gorgeous’ all night long, he remembered… Thank God his pick-up lines have improved so much since then.

“Glad to see that you remember after all,” Loki smiled. “Now, we should probably move this conversation somewhere more comfortable. We’ve much to discuss.”

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaannnddd welcome to the bottom! Congrats on making it through. To reward you, here is a wonderful piece of fan-art that the amazing, fantastic, super-awesome Loptr5150 made based on chapter 6. It's so flipping awesome!! While you're there, check out her other amazing work as well.

http://katerinacaitiff.deviantart.com/art/Trickster-Gods-469510952

Moving truck comes tomorrow morning, so it will be a little bit before the next one. I also want to work a bit on my other story "Choices We Must Make."

Next chapter, Loki and Tony get reacquainted, Bruce and Loki have a chat about Jotun biology and science, and Steve begins to work out some of his issues. All this and some Hawk-sass coming up, so stay tuned!
I am so sorry for taking so long, guys. I've been trying to get certified for a new job which has been killing me and leaving me pretty much brain-dead. Thanks for sticking around and being patient, though.

Once again, I wrote way too freaking much. I'm trying to get it moving along, though. Also, I promise, I will get to some Frostiron soon!

Stark did not get up from the floor. He just sat there, gaping up at Loki as if he had grown a second head. While Loki had taken some mild delight in the fact that the mortal finally did remember him, the novelty of his shock was quickly wearing off. They had a lot to discuss, and Loki needed to do it quickly, because he didn’t know when—or if—Steve would return to their rooms. The prince crossed his arms and gave Stark a look to silently tell him to hurry along, but he just kept staring at him, mouth periodically opening and closing.

“Oh for Norns’ sake.”

Finally fed up, Loki rolled his eyes, knelt down and pulled Stark up by the wrist. The other man made a strange noise as he was yanked up and drug forcefully into the adjoining room. As soon as they stepped into the room, though, they were both overcome by the sounds of the women on the television screen moaning their pleasure. Loki stopped to look, mildly fascinated by the way one woman was penetrating another with a large purple, silicon phallus. She was going rather fast and rough, it seemed to Loki. And the way she penetrated the other girl with her fingers could not have been comfortable with nails as long as hers. It was just impractical to him.

Stark said something that Loki couldn’t hear over the screaming on the television and pulled out of Loki’s hold. Very quickly, the other man moved to turn off the television. Once he did, he was back to staring at Loki with wide eyes as he ran his hand through his hair.

“We need to tal—”

“Shh!” Stark quickly threw his hand over Loki’s mouth to cut him off.

Loki’s eyes narrowed down to a murderous glare. Did this man—this mortal—just shh him? Oh no. Hel no. Loki will not be disrespected here. Not by this man of all people. So he grabbed Stark’s hand, twisted it the way Natasha had done to him earlier that day, and smiled when Stark began to hiss and crumble to the floor.

“Don’t you dare presume to touch me, mortal.”

“Ow, ow, ow! Wasn’t trying to—ow!—disrespect,” Stark said lowly. “They’re watching and listening and—ow, fuck! Please let go of my arm.”

“You’re mistaken. No one is watching or listening to our conversations. While you were huddled in your lavatory, I’ve ensured that we could speak privately. So, please, do not put your hand on
me in such a fashion again."

Once Loki was done, he released Stark’s arm. The other man tumbled back onto the floor with a low grunt and pulled his arm to his chest. He used his other hand to rub the arm, trying to soothe away the ache. Loki had to roll his eyes. He hadn’t even gripped him hard enough to sprain the bone. Such fragile things these creatures were.

“You know, I’m getting real sick of being used as SHIELD’s personal punching bag,” Stark laughed, though there was no humor in his tone.

“I didn’t punch you.”

“Not the point!”

Stark got up onto his knees and slowly worked his way up into a standing position. Once he was more or less eye to eye with Loki, his features morphed into a furious scowl.

“Instead of dragging me around like a rag doll, you could have just told me that shit before.”

“You weren’t being very responsive,” Loki shrugged.

“Yeah, I was a bit surprised by the fact that somebody broke into my fucking room. Then I find out it’s someone I haven’t seen in twenty-five years. I think I’m allowed a little time to process the information.”

“Time is not something that we have a lot of right now, and I have questions that need answering.”

“Yeah, well so do I,” Stark said. “Which one of us gets to go first?”

“Are your questions about me?”

“No, I want to know where Jimmy Hoffa is buried,” Stark said with a roll of his eyes. “What the hell do you think?”

“No need to be so cheeky, Stark.”

“Oh God.” Stark took a deep breath and ran his hand over his face. “In the past twenty-four hours, I’ve basically been kidnapped, tased, burned, threatened, nearly given a heart attack, and put in a kung-fu grip. Cut me a little bit of slack here.”

Loki laughed to himself. This mortal wouldn’t last a day in Asgard, he thought. “Fair enough. You may start.”

“Thank you.” Stark stopped, took in a deep breath and slowly exhaled. Afterwards, his arms shot out, extending and motioning towards Loki. “What the fuck!?”

“…You will have to be more specific.”

“What the fuck?” He said again. “What the fuck is this? What the fuck are you? Jesus, the last time I saw you, I was—like, what, twenty? And you…you look the fucking same and I’m forty-five. What, were you working for SHIELD back then too? Do they pay for a face-lift every five years? Or…fuck, you’re a vampire, aren’t you?”

When Stark paused for breath, Loki held his palm up to silence him. The other man thankfully took the hint and did not try to ask any more questions.
“If you’re done, I will try to answer you, and then we will return to the reason I am here. Is that agreeable?”

Stark nodded.

“Good. Now, yes that was me that you met all of those years ago. My name is Loki, and no, I don’t work for SHIELD. Much like yourself, I am not here because I want to be, and I will be leaving as soon as I can. Now, if that answers all of your questions, then—”

“No, no,” Stark interrupted him. “Hold on. You owe me more than that…Coulson. He said something about you earlier. He said that you were one of their agents. He said that they were doing to you what they did to Captain America back in the 1940s. Is that why you were hanging out with Captain America and Banner? Shit…is that why they sent you here now? They knew that we met before so they’re using you to find out what I have on them?”

Once the mortal paused again, Loki stopped and let the information process. “Is that what Agent Coulson said?”

“Yeah,” Stark nodded. “So was any of that true?”

“I’ve explained to you once before who I am, Stark.”

“When?”

“When we first met.”

“Fucking twenty-five years ago, kid,” Stark scoffed. “I can’t even remember what I had for breakfast yesterday, so you’re going to have to help me out.”

“I don’t have the time to explain it to you. If it comes to your mind later, then fine. If not, then it doesn’t matter. What matters is exactly what you’re doing here.”

“Me?” He said. “What the hell do I have to do with anything?”

Loki sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Feeling mildly frustrated, he backed up to sit down on the bed. Stark’s eyes never left him. Those brown eyes just followed his every movement, watching and examining. He was most likely still trying to get a handle on the situation, but Loki didn’t have the patience to hold his hand and walk him through this. He had come to this realm for a reason and he’d already let himself become too distracted as it was.

“Since I’ve arrived here, I have been followed constantly by both Captain Rogers and the Lady Natasha Romanoff. They watch my every movement, watching and examining. He was most likely still trying to get a handle on the situation, but Loki didn’t have the patience to hold his hand and walk him through this. He had come to this realm for a reason and he’d already let himself become too distracted as it was.

“How the hell should I know? I didn’t even remember who the hell you were until you broke in here.”

“Curious then,” Loki said.

“You said they were asking me how you knew me?” Loki nodded. “Coulson was asking me the same about you.”

“Who are you to these people?”
“I don’t know… I was the guy who designed all of their weapons. I guess in a way I still am.”

“Uh-huh,” Loki nodded. “Well, that explains why they want to know about my relationship with you.”

“What about you?” Stark asked. “What’s with all of the cover-up they’ve got with you? I mean, fuck, they’ve got a whole section on you in their system that even I can’t hack into. And trust me when I say that means something.”

“Do they now?” Loki’s lips slowly spread out into a sly smile. “That may be worth a look.”

“Yeah, good luck with that. Genius over here, remember? If I can’t get into it, I doubt you’ll have much better luck.”

“I have my ways, Stark. I was able to escape my own room and enter yours without detection, after all.”

“There’s a bit of a difference between crawling through an air duct and hacking into a government protected system.”

“So primitive,” Loki said with a tsk.

“…I’m not even going to try to guess what that means,” Stark said, shaking his head. “Look, it’s been a long day, and tomorrow is probably going to be even longer. Can you please just tell me why I got my ass handed to me by Coulson because of you?”

“No, I don’t think I will,” Loki answered. He smirked at Stark and stood from the bed. Having gotten basically what he came for, Loki stood from the bed and prepared himself to return to his rooms. This visit had been mildly disappointing. He had hoped that from the way the agents were acting that perhaps Stark was an important figure, perhaps even the keeper of some great Midgardian secrets. As it turned out, though, Hermes had been right about this mortal. He was nothing but the spawn of Hephaestus; a craftsman responsible for creating the weapons and shields that these mortals used to destroy each other. Pity. Loki remembered that he had been good company beforehand. There was no need to waste time on him now, though, if he had nothing to offer.

When Loki started to teleport back to his room, but before he could concentrate on his location, Stark’s hand reached out and grabbed his forearm. Loki’s eyes shot down to the offending hand and instantly Stark let go.

“Right, no touching. Sorry,” he apologized. “But come on, give me a damn break here. You can’t just drop this shit on me and leave me with nothing. Just…fuck—just tell me who you are?”

“I told you once before, Stark.”

“Humor me then,” Stark snapped. “And it’s Tony… Please, just tell me what the hell is going on.”

Loki should have rolled his eyes at the mortal’s request and carried on back to his room. This man wasn’t worth his time and, at the moment, he had nothing of value to offer Loki. But he had to go look into Stark’s big brown eyes. The other man just looked so frustrated and weary. His skin was pale, his eyes had dark rings under them, and he just looked so damn tired. Looking back on it, Loki will say that it was sympathy for the man that had gotten to him. In reality, though, there was a part of Loki that remembered something about the night that they first met. A part of him that remembered the way Tony had made him smile with such ease, and the way he had kissed him so
sweetly. Loki could claim all he likes that he had a hard heart, but there was still a tenderness there reserved for a select few; the ones he had let in long ago. That night that they first met, Loki had let Tony in.

“Fine, Tony,” Loki said. The man looked a little more relaxed after Loki said his name. “I am Loki —”

“You’ve mentioned that.”

“— of Asgard, and I am burdened with glorious purpose.”

“Ok,” Tony said slowly. “And what kind of purpose might that be?”

“One that I have been fighting against for centuries. I came to this realm to escape that purpose, and to fulfill my new one.”

“…Ok, no help there.”

“You said that you were a genius, Tony. Figure it out.”

“You know, from what I remember, you were a lot nicer back then,” Tony laughed. Loki had to laugh a little at that as well.

“Time has a way of changing people, Tony.”

“That’s a shame… because I liked you back then.”

“That doesn’t mean much to me.”

“And yet… you remembered me,” Tony said, his lips stretching out into a grin. “Did I leave that much of an impression on you? Can’t blame you really,” he shrugged. “I was pretty damn adorable back then. And I’ve gotta say, I’ve aged like a fine bottle of wine. It’s no surprise you’d want to look me up after all of this time.”

“For Norms’ sake,” Loki said with a roll of his eyes. He couldn’t stop the small smile that crept onto his lips, though. *This* was much more like what he remembered. “You think too highly of yourself.”

“Um, yeah. That’s kind of my thing. Well, that and making everyone else feel inferior to my intellect.”

“We have that in common.”

“Maybe we should start a club. We’ll just go to functions together, stand in a corner and judge people. We’ll call ourselves Two Assholes Who Talk Shit. TWATS for short. Although now that I say it out loud it sounds more like a morning radio show.”

“I’m not familiar with that term.”

“It’s a high compliment here. You should use it pretty often, especially if you’re going to be hanging around Coulson.”

“I’ll remember to do so,” Loki smirked. Tony returned the gesture. “I must say, you’re recovering quite well from your earlier confusion.”

“In my line of work I’ve had to learn how to roll with the punches.”
“I haven’t punched you.”

“It’s a damn expression,” Tony said with exasperation. “Or do they not have metaphors wherever you’re from?”

“You’ll forgive me, though I’ve spent much time in this realm, none of its inhabitants have managed to capture my attention enough to educate me on your vernacular. Though, I suppose I will have to learn, if Captain Rogers and Lady Romanoff insist on being my shadows.”

“Captain America, huh?” Tony asked. “How the hell do you know him?”

“He is an old acquaintance. I met him centuries ago when I first came here. That was when I met your father as well.”

“Oh yeah,” Tony nodded. “Fuck, you did say something about that before, didn’t you?”

“Yes, good to see that you remember.”

“What did you think of the old man?”

“He was crass, rude, and boorish. Much like yourself.”

“Well I’m sorry that I wasn’t raised to have the caring warmth that you’re radiating, sunshine. Seriously, do you do any volunteer work? Because you’re very comforting. I can see myself opening up to you.”

“Your sense of wit was much sharper before.”

“I was mostly drunk before.”

“As was I, if I remember. That’s probably the reason I found you charming.”

“And yet you broke into my room at three in the morning just to talk to me,” Tony countered.

“No. I came here to see if you had anything of value to offer. Clearly you don’t, so I will take my leave.”

“Really? So soon? I was really starting to have fun. Come on and stay. We can break out the Ouija board and make this a real sleepover, and—holy shit, you just disappeared.”

Having grown tired of Tony’s snark, Loki decided to make his exit. Tony was left standing there, staring into the space where the other man literally vanished. He took a moment to process what the hell had just happened, but he couldn’t come up with any kind of reasonable explanation. Who the hell was that guy? Tony made a mental note to ask JARVIS to look up anything about the names Loki, Asgard, and seidr the next time they were alone. Maybe then he would be able to get some straight answers.

“What a bitch,” Tony said to himself. At the same time, though, he couldn’t fight the smirk forming at the corner of his lips. “…I want one.”

***

After ten hours in the lab and four hours of sleep, Bruce was no closer to understanding the situation than he was when he first arrived at SHIELD. The results for Loki’s body scan were confusing enough as it was, but after being locked with Dr. Selvig and the Tesseract for so long, Bruce was sure that he was about to lose his mind. The power that was in the Tesseract was unlike
anything that Bruce had ever seen before, even more so than when he had worked on the Gamma Bomb—which thankfully, the government had abandoned. The few surges of energy that had sparked from it were off the charts, and they were lucky that nothing more than the plaster of the lab wall ended up fried. The device was clearly too unstable to be housed around so many people, but there was something odd about it, something that seemed to be keeping it in control.

That something, oddly enough, was Dr. Selvig himself. Whenever it seemed that the Tesseract was about to lose control and Bruce and the lab assistants scrambled to find a solution, Selvig would begin to speak. At first, Bruce just thought that perhaps he had been talking to himself, trying to find a solution to their problem by assessing it aloud. After the third time it happened, though, Bruce saw that he wasn’t talking to himself, but to the Tesseract itself. Whenever the cube seemed as if it were about to become unstable, Selvig would approach it as close as he could and speak in a calming manner, referring to it as a “she” and telling it to take it easy. Bruce thought that perhaps the older scientist was beginning to lose it due to frustration and isolation from the real world, but then the Tesseract started to respond. Whenever Selvig started making calm, non-threatening gestures toward it, it responded by becoming more stable until the energy levels weren’t critical anymore. It answered Selvig, almost as if it were not just an energy source, but a sentient being.

Bruce really wished he was back in Calcutta.

As it was, though, he was stuck in an underground government base, standing across from what was apparently an alien. An alien that had wires attached to his head and a painfully bored expression on his face. Bruce ignored it for the moment and pulled up the results from yesterday’s scan onto the screen, along with the results of Loki’s bloodwork and information that he’d gained from the Tesseract. Though he still wasn’t sure exactly what he was dealing with, he knew for sure now that Fury had been right; somehow, Loki and the Tesseract were connected.

“Explain to me again exactly why I am here, Dr. Banner?” His patient asked with a stifled yawn in his voice. Loki looked as if he’d gotten as much sleep as Bruce had these past few days.

“Just doing some follow up work from yesterday. Some stuff about the results raised a few questions. I was hoping you could answer them for me.”

“I would have thought that Director Fury would have kept my nature a secret at all costs.”

“Fury and I have a bit of an agreement.”

“What kind of agreement would that be? You do your experiments on me and he gets the information?”

“Kind of. It’s not as nefarious as all of that, though. Basically, you’re my patient now, so I’m allowed to know everything about you, and if I find something odd, I have to report it back to Fury. Do you mind answering a few questions for me?”

Loki nodded. Bruce turned away from the holo-screen to grab his pen and clipboard. He would enter the data manually later, but for now he wanted to get down all he could.

There were a lot of questions that Bruce wanted to ask. So many that he didn’t know where to begin. And so many that Loki had probably all heard before and had an answer to. So Bruce took a preparatory breath and thought of a way to break the ice.

“Where are your bodyguards today?”

Loki laughed a little and leaned back to rest on the heels of his hands. “Agent Romanoff has
mercifully decided that I can be trusted alone with you for now, though no doubt she will be back. As for Captain Rogers, I am afraid I have not seen him since noon yesterday… He was not in a good way.”

Bruce nodded and made a small “hmm.” He saw yesterday that the captain looked a bit tense. He’d seen that expression with a lot of soldiers during his time with the military.

“Well, I’m glad for my sake at least that they trust you to behave, but I doubt that we’re alone. Fury is probably keeping tabs just in case.”

“A man with one eye, but somehow able to see all… And I thought I had left that all behind,” Loki laughed.

“Tell me about where you’re from? What is the environment like there? Or the people?”

“Asgard is similar to Midgard in many senses. They both share similar wildlife and fauna, though on Asgard there are creatures that died out and become myth here long ago, or the people of this realm have given different titles… This realm is different, though, in the sense that it can support more life than Asgard can.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Asgard is relatively small in comparison to the other realms. It is flat, suspended in Yggdrasil at the highest branch and the center of two revolving suns. It is always, so hot there… a sweltering, blistering heat that burns me within a matter of minutes. It is trapped in an endless summer, with no chance of new life and rebirth… I think that is what attracted me about Midgard. There is so much diversity here. There are seasons and climates that I had never seen before. There is so much change here. It’s quite admirable, actually.”

“Huh…” It’s all that Bruce could manage to say. “And what about your race? Are they all like you?”

“There is no one like me,” Loki scoffed. “I live with the Aesir, they have ensured that I am disguised as one of them, but I am not of their blood.”

“Tell me about them.”

“They appear similar to your race, though that is due in part to Odin’s meddling. This realm is one of his protectorates, and he had a section of this realm that worshipped him and his kin as their gods… Somehow I seem to have made it into the mix as well,” Loki shrugged.

“Wait… You’re that Loki?”

“Do you know of another?”

Bruce paused, laughed, and shook his head. “So they look human?”

“Yes, though they are stronger and more advanced… But your race seems to be catching up slightly. You are using one of their antiquated systems there.” Loki pointed to the holo-screen. “Given a few more centuries, you might just catch up.”

“You said that you weren’t one of them… So where are you from?”

At that question, Loki grew silent. The smirk he was wearing fell and his eyes lowered slightly.
“I was born on Jotunheim.” As if anticipating Bruce’s next question, Loki continued on. “It is a large realm, spherical like this one, but hangs on one of the lowest branches of Yggdrasil. There is no natural sunlight there, the only light comes from a close by nebulae… It’s rather beautiful, reflecting the blue light of the ice and snow.”

“So…Jotunheim is the opposite of Asgard then? Always winter instead of summer?”

When Loki nodded, Bruce turned back to the screen and pulled up Loki’s thermal scan alongside the x-rays. The bone and organ structure, the blood results, and the core temperature were starting to make sense now. As was his solar urticarial condition. Loki was, technically, an artic mammal. There was fat covering his organs to keep them warm, the enlarged liver and spleen was for his metabolic system, and his blood contained cryoprotectant. When Bruce first read the results, he thought for sure that somehow the sample had been contaminated, but it made sense now. If Loki’s race were creatures that lived in a constant state of freeze, then their bodies naturally contained ways to prevent them from freezing to death, similar to arctic frogs or salamanders… This was incredible.

Bruce couldn’t keep the small smile off his face when he asked Loki to describe his race. He didn’t notice the wistful look in Loki’s eyes as he described creatures of incredible height and strength. He told Bruce that his race were ancient and powerful, able to use something called sedir to manipulate their world and the ice around them. When Bruce asked for specific details about their physiology, Loki told him that the Jotun were large creatures, all of one sex, blue of skin, and cold to the touch; how their skin could burn the Aesir on contact. He spoke of tribal scars, red eyes, and horns. Bruce thought it all over in his head… Blue skin to camouflauge with the ice, red eyes to see in low lighting, horns for—dominance, defense, mating, cooling? He wasn’t sure, he wasn’t a zoologist, just someone who watched a lot of NatGeo.

“Would it be rude to ask why, if your people are large, you’re small in stature? I mean, not really small in comparison to people on this planet, but from what you were describing.”

“There is no need to be so polite about it, doctor. I have been called a runt many times before,” Loki said. “From what I’ve read and been told, there are some of my kind who are smaller in stature, though it is a rarity.”

Bruce made a non-committal sound and pulled up Loki’s x-ray on the holo-screen, turning it so that it could face him.

“Loki, do you know what this is?”

“My skeletal structure. I’ve seen it many times before with Eir’s soul forge.”

“Do you know how to read them, though?”

Loki shook his head.

“From what I’ve seen here, your bones are small for your frame, and they lack the proper density. I’ve seen this a few times with malnourished patients. Did they starve you where you were?”

Loki looked confused, but shook his head. “I ate regularly, but I was expected to keep a lithe form.”

“Strange…” Bruce made a humming sound. “Your bones aren’t as dense as they should be for someone of your equivalent age. Malnutrition would help explain that, but it could also explain a delay in your stature.”
“So…I’m supposed to be larger than what I am?”

“I can’t say that for sure, but it’s possible.” Bruce shrugged. “There was something else that bothered me.”

Bruce paused, tapped on screen and enlarged the image of the skull. “Can you tell me what these scars are here?” He pointed out to the circular shapes he had noticed the day before.

Loki examined them for a few moments, but he could not determine what they were. Bruce thought about it, when the thought of what Loki told him about horns registered.

“Loki, you said that your people had horns. Did you ever have any or remember having any?”

“No… I did not know the truth of my nature until I had my first bleeding. I never knew anything about the horns until I saw pictures of them in tomes.”

“Do…” Bruce took a deep breath and thought about how to phrase his next question. If his hunch was right, this was going to be a hard one to explain. “Do you know anything about dehorning?”

“Dehorning?”

“It’s… It’s a, uh, procedure where animals—typically younger ones, like baby goats—have their horns cut off and cauterized to keep them from growing back… I haven’t seen it personally, or the result from it, but, uh… based on the circular shape of these scars…”

Just as he thought, Loki’s eyes went wide in surprise. His left hand shot up to his forehead, feeling the smooth skin as if he could somehow feel the bud of the horn beneath it. His mouth opened slightly, taking in tiny pants of air.

“…T-that bastard,” Loki whispered. “That one-eyed, thrice-damned, son of a whore!”

“Who?”

“Odin,” Loki hissed the name. His green eyes flashed towards Bruce, shooting the most hateful glare that Bruce had ever seen on another person. He looked into Bruce’s eyes and stared him down, his shoulders shaking and chest heaving. “It wasn’t enough that he had to take my skin, he had to take away a part of me as well!”

The small pounding in Bruce’s skull suddenly returned.

“Loki,” Bruce said his name slowly. “I’m going to need you to take a couple of deep breaths for me. Can you do that?”

Loki continued staring daggers at him. With each second that passed, the pounding in his skull grew until Bruce was gripping his clipboard so tightly that his knuckles were turning white. He had to get Loki to calm down.

“Three deep breaths for me. Please?”

Another moment passed, and Bruce felt like he was going to snap. He couldn’t force Loki to calm down—that would have been ironic coming from him—but he had to do something, because for whatever reason, Loki’s emotions were effecting him. After another full minute, though, Loki began to breathe in deep from his nose before exhaling from his mouth. He did this about ten times before he began to visibly relax. Just as Bruce thought, his headache began to recede. He was really going to have to look into this later.
Once he was visibly calm, Bruce took the risk and asked Loki why he had gotten so upset. The prince explained to him how he had been forced to acclimate into the Aesir culture. He spoke of seidr—magic, he explained to Bruce—and how Odin used it to keep him locked in his present form. He claimed that he could shift his shapes, though, for which Bruce asked for a demonstration. Loki had smirked then, and the next thing Bruce knew, there was a small black and white bird sitting on the exam table.

The initial sight of it took Bruce by surprise, causing him to drop his clipboard. After a moment, though, he began to laugh. The monitors in the room were going crazy. Bruce asked to see another demonstration, and the bird suddenly became a beautiful, buxom woman with red painted lips and poisonous green eyes. She winked at Bruce, making his cheeks flush. The monitors began to react again. When Bruce finally examined them, he noticed why they were reacting. Much like the Tesseract whenever it gave off a burst of energy, Loki was giving off faint waves of gamma radiation…This was unbelievable.

For the next two hours, he had Loki test various forms of his magic, each time monitoring the amount of radiation that he was emanating. Small things like forming ice or fire was just enough to cause a small blip on his screen. The larger spells—teleportation, transfiguration, invisibility—gave off a significant amount of radiation. What was interesting, though, was that the largest amounts of radiation came when Loki simply emanated waves of his green colored energy. From what Bruce could gather, it was pure, controlled radiation. Of course he wasn’t able to test it for too long. Much like before when Loki became angry, when he gave off whiffs of his green energy, the pulsing in Bruce’s head would return. Worse still, after the first few minutes of watching the waves of green waft around Loki, Bruce could feel the Other Guy beginning to stir inside of him. He quickly called an end to that experiment before he could lose control.

During the experiments, he had managed to get Loki talking to him about aspects of his life in the world he came from. He managed to weave a very sad tale of emotional—and sometimes physical—abuse, of control and manipulation, of a boy locked away in a cage, waiting to be used. Bruce knew he shouldn’t be talking to him about such things. There was nothing he could really do for Loki on that front—he wasn’t that kind of doctor. Still, Bruce couldn’t help but feel a little tug of empathy pulling at him, wanting him to…Shit, he didn’t know. Comfort? Protect? He couldn’t allow himself to let his emotions get to him. Not in this.

“Emotions,” Bruce whispered to himself suddenly.

“I beg your pardon, doctor?”

Bruce didn’t answer. Some kind of light went off in his head as he remembered his conversation with Fury from the day before. He went to the holoscreen and pulled up the images of Loki’s brain scan. He enhanced the images of Loki’s insulae and focused on the lesions. The monitors were still connected to Loki’s head. If this was going where Bruce thought, then he would need another test.

“Doctor Banner?”

“Loki, can you do me a favor? Can you do another shapeshift for me?”

“I see that you haven’t tired of that parlor trick,” Loki smirked.

“Just humor me.”

“Haven’t I been doing that all along?”

Loki gave Bruce another one of those superior smiles before closing his eyes and shifting his
shape. In a flash of green, Bruce was suddenly looking at a smirking version of himself. He had to give it to Loki, he got every detail just right. From the small streaks of grey in his hair, to the creases in his forehead, the lines under his eyes from lack of sleep, and even the stubble that had begun to grow on his chin overnight.

“Satisfied?” Bruce heard his own voice speak to him. Did he really sound like that? Didn’t matter, he supposed.

Bruce looked back to the screen, and just as he thought, there was activity in the insulae. It was pulsing again. He asked Loki to do a smaller trick, which caused a smaller reaction.

“Aren’t we almost done?” The Bruce-Loki asked. “I’m getting rather hungry, which makes me irritable. You wouldn’t like me when I’m irritable.”

Bruce had to laugh at that one.

“We’ll call it a break soon,” Bruce promised. “You’ll have to forgive my excitement. I haven’t had something this interesting to work on in years.”

He heard Loki make a grunting sound as he crossed his arms. In a flash of green light, Loki transformed back into himself. “So glad that I make for an interesting distraction.”

The insulae on the screen gave off a stronger pulse, lighting up the lesions. At the same time, Bruce felt something twinge inside of him. Time to play with fire.

“Ok, one more thing and then we’ll be done. Fury probably needs me back anyway.”

“What for?”

“Afraid I can’t say. Loki, can you change yourself one more time?”

“What would you have me become this time?” Loki asked with a sigh in his voice.

“Well, I’ve seen you in every shape, including that weird tentacle thing—”

“An Aaskavarian. Filthy creatures.”

“Yeah, that. Anyway, how about you turn into what you really are. I want to see what a Jotun looks like.”

At his request, Loki’s eyes narrowed dangerously at him. “I’ve already told you that I can’t.”

“Just try.”

“I can’t!” Loki snapped. “Odin’s curse keeps me locked in Aesir form. I can’t transform into my true form at will.”

“I believe you,” Bruce said. “But I’m just asking you to try… This curse thing that you’re talking about, I have a hunch about it.”

It took another moment of Loki openly glaring at him before the prince took a deep breath and a look of concentration came over him. For a long time, nothing happened. There was no flash of green light or instantaneous transformation. There wasn’t even a blip on the holo-screen. The only evidence he had that Loki was actually trying was the fact that a vein on his forehead looked almost ready to burst. He tried for another moment before he stopped and began to pant.
“Are you alright?”

“I told you that I can’t do it,” he snapped.

“Just try one more time,” Bruce said, unwanted frustration growing in his voice.

“I can’t!”

“Try!”

Before he realized what he was doing, Bruce’s fist slammed down onto the table, rattling the contents on top. His skull was beginning to hurt and he felt an unjustified anger creeping up on him. Usually, now would be the time that whoever in the room with him would be reaching for their weapons while trying to keep him calm. Loki didn’t, though. He sat on the exam table, fingers gripping the edge, chest panting and stared Bruce down…through eyes that were red.

Bruce didn’t know when or how it happened, but Loki’s once green eyes were now shining red as he openly glared at him. The whites of his eyes were tinged a lighter shade of red, while his iris were deep, the color of blood. It was strange to see, strange to experience. Despite their hours of experimentation, this was the actual first reminder that Loki was indeed not human. It was remarkable, and a little frightening.

The Other Guy inside of him didn’t seem to agree. He could feel him inside, growling and stirring, like a beast inside a cage. He supposed that’s what he truly was.

Bruce had to force himself to look away from Loki and back to the holo-screen. The pulsating was worse than ever before. Even more interesting, though, the lesions in the insulae had grown and were giving off their own faint light. The more Loki’s insulae pulsed, the larger the lesions seemed to grow, as if they were trying to combat against it. Huh…

Before Bruce could ponder on it any longer, or even mention what he was seeing to Loki, the door to the room burst open. Fury came into the room with his gun already raised and aimed at Bruce. He should have expected it, he supposed.

“Director Fury,” Bruce nodded in the man’s direction. If his voice came out as a growl, he didn’t notice it.

“Dr. Banner,” Fury said his name slowly. “I’m going to need you to leave this room right now. Can you do that for me?”

“And why would I do that?” Bruce turned to face Fury. The Director’s one eye widened a fraction, looking down at his hand.

Bruce was confused until he too looked down. He didn’t know where it came from, but there was a scalpel in his clenched hand.

Bruce let out a surprised gasp and dropped it immediately. That didn’t seem to appease Fury.

“I’m not going to ask you again, Dr. Banner. Remove yourself from this room. Now.”

With little other option, Bruce nodded his head. He raised his hands, palms up, to show Fury that he was complying with his request. The Director’s eye and gun followed him all of the way out of the room. Before he left, Bruce spared one last glance to Loki. The prince was watching him intently, the corners of his lips turned slightly upward, and the red of his eyes slowly bleeding away. What Bruce didn’t know was that his own brown eyes were now a vibrant shade of green.
“We can’t let him go back in there again, sir.”

Agent Hill was standing still, arms behind her back while she kept her watchful eye on the Director. Fury was at the limit of his patience at the moment. In the past twenty-four hours, life had become very complicated for her boss. The Tesseract was still unstable—much to the detriment of the Council—Stark was snooping through their files, there was a virus planted somewhere in their system (probably by Stark), Rogers had left without any word the day before, and now Banner was a step away from becoming the Hulk. She could understand why her superior was pacing his office in frustration.

“I need him. He’s the only one qualified who can understand the link.”

“That may be, sir, but in his two encounters with Laufeyjarson he’s shown signs of releasing the Hulk. As useful as his study of Laufeyjarson may be, we can’t afford the risk of Banner losing control.”

“Damn it!” Fury snapped. He kicked at the chair in front of his desk. Maria didn’t flinch when it fell over.

“There is a link between Laufeyjarson and the Tesseract,” Fury said.

“I believe that there is as well, sir, but for now we can only speculate as to what it is.” Fury didn’t seem to be any more relaxed by her observation. Maria looked down at the floor and took a deep breath. “Sir, we’ve been working towards Phase 2 for years. The Council is threatening to pull all funding for the project unless we make progress towards the next phase…At this time, I don’t think that it would be wise to divide the attention to Laufeyjarson.”

At that, Fury stopped and looked towards her. “Do you think he’s a threat?”

“I think he’s suspicious,” she said. “I don’t think that his appearance here at a time when the Tesseract is at critical condition is a coincidence… I just don’t think that it is worth throwing away years of research and work, sir.”

Fury gave out a small huff at her statement, but at least he looked as if he were contemplating her words. Deciding to take the risk, Maria continued on.

“I’ve had time to look over Banner’s findings on Laufeyjarson. From what I understand, he and the Tesseract both contain levels of gamma that they can give off at will. Perhaps, sir, the Tesseract is reacting the way it is because of his presence here?”

“Go on.”

“Given that the history of the Tesseract’s instability coincides with Laufeyjarson’s timeline on earth, then it may be possible that it is reacting this way because of his proximity to it. This would explain why it has been even more unstable here with him so close by.”

“So your theory is that he’s the reason it’s going haywire?” Fury stopped pacing and stared her down. Maria gave a firm nod. “…I guess given the fact that we have gods walking among us, we can’t leave anything out of the realm of possibilities.” He conceded.

“Since you’re full of ideas at the moment, any theories as to why Banner comes close to losing control whenever he’s around our guess.”
“That one may be a bit harder to pin down, sir,” she answered honestly. “Maybe Laufeyjarson just pisses him off.”

“Possible,” Fury laughed lightly. “Might be more to it than that.”

“Until we figure out exactly what that is, sir, I stand by my earlier statement. We can’t let Dr. Banner be back in a room with him again until we’re sure what it is that is setting him off.”

Fury scowled at that. “I still need Laufeyjarson examined.”

“We can find a way to do so, sir. I just feel that for safety procedures, it shouldn’t be Banner. And it probably shouldn’t be here.”

Fury thought about it for a moment before nodding. “We can move him to the New York base. We’ll keep the Tesseract here and keep Banner on the project. Selvig can go with Laufeyjarson to New York.”

“I don’t think that will work, sir.”

“And why not?”

“Selvig has made more progress than anyone on the Tesseract. If anyone can get us to Phase 2 on schedule, it’s him. And aside from that, sir, I don’t believe that he will be willing to leave the Tesseract… From what I understand, he’s built a rapport with it.”

“A rapport?”

“That’s what he claims, sir. I don’t know what he means by it, but I’ve observed him at work. The Tesseract…it seems to listen to him, sir.”

“Alright,” Fury said slowly. “Selvig will stay here with Banner. Who do we have to run tests on Laufeyjarson?”

“I, um…” Maria paused, uncharacteristically nervous over her next suggestion. “I have an idea, sir, but you’re not going to like it.”

Fury gave her a look, indicating her to continue.

“Stark.”

“You’re right. I don’t like it.”

“Understandably so, but it may work in our favor. We already know that Stark is going through our systems—it’s one of the reasons the Council objected to bringing him in—”

“I’m aware of what the Council wanted, Agent Hill.”

“Be that as it may, sir, he’s already in and it’s likely that he knows too much as it is. He’s already expressed concerns with Coulson about weaponizing the Tesseract. If he discovers Phase 2, then he could undo all of our work. If we distract him with Laufeyjarson, though, then it may keep him out of our hair.”

“And what’s to stop him from running to the press about what he finds out about Laufeyjarson? As far as we know he’s still more of a potential threat than the Tesseract.”

“That may be, sir, but so far he’s been compliant and willing to work with us. Given what he
demonstrated to Banner this afternoon, he has the ability to not only overpower every agent at our disposal with his magic, but he could transform himself into any high ranking SHIELD agent and walk out with whatever he needs. If he wanted to attack us, sir, he’s had the ability to do so. If he’s holding out…well then I say it’s better to get him away from the Tesseract before he decides to show his hand.”

Fury didn’t say anything for a long moment. He kept his good eye staring straight forward on his right-hand agent. She had a point. The Tesseract was more or less dormant before the arrival of Loki on their planet. And they were going to get nowhere in understanding Loki if Banner couldn’t be in the same room with him without the threat of releasing the Hulk. Not to mention that in the brief time Stark was in their custody, he was causing more trouble than he was worth. He’d brought the man on hoping that he would get past his own ego and be some kind of help. He supposed that was too much to wish for. Possible world catastrophe didn’t seem to matter if Tony Stark had his mind set on something else… Still, as Agent Hill said, it may be better to give him something else to focus on aside from Phase 2. Maybe Loki would provide enough of a distraction… It may also give them a better understanding of Stark and Loki’s connection.

“Stark doesn’t tell him anything about the Tesseract,” Fury said.

“That goes without saying, sir.”

“Laufeyjarson stays under supervision at the New York base. Stark too. If either try to leave, make sure that they are both tailed at all times.”

“I can have the STRIKE team with Ward and Rumlow act as personal guards. Ward has been tailing Stark since yesterday afternoon.”

“It’s not Stark I’m worried about. STRIKE team stays here with the Tesseract. Romanoff and Barton will go. Laufeyjarson knows her and is building a rapport with her. Barton knows how to see without being seen. Have them ready to go by the end of the day.”

“Yes, sir,” she nodded. “Sir, we still don’t know the whereabouts of Captain Rogers. If he should come back after we’ve moved Laufeyjarson?”

“Damn it,” Fury sighed. Given the man’s declaration of acting as Loki’s personal guard, he had a feeling that the Captain wouldn’t take it well if he came back to find Loki gone.

“Just hope that he’s back before then.”

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Steve had lost track of the time. He only knew that he’d been gone from the SHIELD base for a full day when he saw the sun begin to set on the D.C. skyline. He had to admit, the sunset was very beautiful in the capital. The sun was just to the base of the Washington Monument, reflecting its orange glow over the Lincoln Memorial reflecting pool, with the black of the night sky slowly creeping in overhead. This view was definitely worth the seventy year wait.

Steve had wanted to come to the capital since he was a kid. Before the Depression hit, his uncle had been a part of the construction crew that had originally built the reflecting pool at the base of the Lincoln Memorial. He had been a single guy, living alone with no family of his own, so he would send whatever he could spare to his sister, Steve’s mother. Whenever he sent money, he also sent letters and a couple of postcards, telling them about everything that was happening in the capital, and how the times were changing fast. Steve had always been so intrigued by the images of the historical buildings and the sense of importance they seemed to carry. He’d always wanted to
see it for himself. He just didn’t think he’d have to wait so long.

He’d managed to get a good look around the capital since he ran out of the SHIELD base the day before. He was honestly surprised that no one had tried to stop him. The capital was a lot different than what he imagined in his childhood, though he wasn’t sure how much of that difference to attribute to the passage of time. The buildings had grown taller, the streets were dirtier, and everywhere he went, people were calling each other crooks. There was a lot of tension here, a lot of distrust, something that he couldn’t really imagine from his time… It just went to show again how out of touch he was with the rest of the world.

As the sun finally dipped below the horizon and the lights for the Lincoln Memorial came on behind him, Steve took the cap off his flask and drank in a deep gulp of whiskey. Contrary to the promotional posters and propaganda of his time, Steve Rogers—Captain America—did like to indulge himself in the bottle every once in a while. Being the grandson of Irish immigrants and a worker at the shipyards for the better part of his adult life, Steve learned to gain an appreciation for whiskey. He liked the dark look of it, the warm, oak taste, and the slight burn it left when going down the throat. Mostly, he liked the way it could take away the sting of a bad day. Of all the things he missed from his life before the serum, it was probably that… Lord knows he could use something to take away thoughts of the past few days, just like he needed something for the day that Bucky fell. But, just as it was then, Steve would now have to resort living with his thoughts, instead of finding something to help numb it.

“You know, I don’t think you’re allowed to drink here.”

The voice came so suddenly that Steve almost choked on his whiskey. He managed to swallow down the liquid in his mouth before he looked up to see a man with a stern face wearing a leather jacket standing over him. The man was looking down at Steve expectantly, and it took Steve a moment to remember that he had seen the man before. He was the one who knocked out Howard’s son. Though Steve couldn’t remember his name at the moment.

“Fury send you to bring me back?”

The man laughed a little and shook his head. “Nah,” he said as he sat himself down. “If he wanted to do that I would have shot you with a tranquilizer while you were walking around the Mall. Believe me, I would have had a good shot.”

When Steve didn’t say anything, the man laughed again. “Relax, just a joke. I don’t even have my bow with me. You’re completely safe.”

“Right.” Steve nodded and took another drink of his whiskey, savoring the burn.

“But seriously, I don’t think you can drink on the memorial grounds,” he pointed to the flask.

“Yeah, well, what are they going to do? Arrest Captain America?” Steve shrugged.

“Does seem kind of treasonous, doesn’t it?” Steve didn’t reply, but nodded his head and stared off ahead of him. “We didn’t get to be properly introduced before when I, you know, put the hurt on Stark. I’m Clint.”

Clint extended his hand for Steve to take. Steve paused, but shook it regardless. No need to be rude.

“Strong grip,” Clint said as he shook out his hand.

“So if Fury didn’t send you to bring me back, what brings you here?”
“Nat was worried. You ran out so fast, she thought you might do something stupid.”

“So why didn’t she come get me herself? Is she afraid of me now?”

“Natasha?” Clint laughed. “Hell, I don’t think there’s a thing alive that can scare that woman. Nah… she didn’t think that you would want to see her at the moment.”

Steve clenched his fist tight to stop the shaking. The whiskey couldn’t cure that either.

“Did she tell you about what happened?”

“No. She’s more respectful than that. I saw what happened, though.”

Steve turned to look at him. “How?”

“That’s what I love about my nests,” Clint smiled. “It turns you into a little fly on the wall. Believe me, I can see a lot at a good distance.”

“That’s not very comforting,” Steve said. “So… you really saw everything?”

“Yeah,” Clint said. He didn’t smile this time. “You want to talk about it?”

“Not particularly.”


“Besides, I know whatever I say will go right back to Fury. He’ll write it down in some report, file it away and figure out how to fix it so he can get me functioning in the real world again.”

“I told you, I’m not here for Fury. I’m here for Nat.”

“If you’re going to lie to me, then at least take out your earpiece.” Steve pointed to the black device tucked in Clint’s ear. “I figured that SHIELD would have trained you better than that.”

“First off all, they did, so there’s no need to be rude,” Clint said. “Second of all, if you’d bother to look closely, you’d notice that this isn’t an earpiece.”

Clint reached up and pulled the device out of his ear. He held it up to show Steve. It was a flesh colored device, no larger than a bean. It was a hearing aid. Steve instantly felt mortified.

“God, I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I didn’t think.”

“What!?” Clint shouted.

“Um… I said I’m sorry!”

“I’m just fucking with you,” Clint laughed. He put the device back into his ear and smiled again. “Not about the hearing aid, that shit’s real. I can read lips, though.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think about that.”

“Don’t worry about it. Honest mistake. Some battle scars aren’t as obvious.”

Steve had a feeling that was a hint, but he didn’t want to follow up on it.

“Did you get that on an assignment, then?”
“I wish. It would have made for a more interesting story,” Clint said with a smile. It wasn’t as bright as the other smiles, though. “Nah, this was a curtesy of my old man. He, uh… liked to hit the bottle and then he liked to hit me and my brother. One night he just hit a little too hard and boom… things went quiet on this side.”

“I…uh, I’m sorry.” Steve didn’t really know what else to say to that.

“Yeah, me too. What can you do about it, though? Just gotta make your peace with it and move on. Can’t let that shit weigh you down all of your life.”

“Well… glad you made your peace.”

A moment of silence passed between them. A couple of people—tourists most likely—trickled around the reflection pool, snapping their pictures and laughing with their friends. A group of three guys and two girls were walking by the base of the steps to the memorial. They were young, Steve noted. Probably late teens but no more than twenty-one. They were smiling, shouting things to each other, and didn’t seem to have a care in the world. Steve wished it were that easy when he was that age. When he was twenty, war broke out. He spent that next year trying his damndest to find someone willing to let him to enlist. When he was twenty-two, he became the symbol of America’s determination to win the war. When he was twenty-three, he had lost everything—his best friend, the woman he loved, and his life—for the sake of his country.

“Bucky! Hang on!”

Steve’s hand shook so hard that the liquor spilled out of the flask. Steve cursed under his breath, which caught Clint’s attention.

“You ok?”

“No,” Steve sighed. “I’m really not.”

Clint didn’t say a word. He didn’t push, he didn’t pry, and he didn’t try to tell Steve that it was all ok. Because they both knew that it wasn’t. Things felt like they were never going to be ok again. All because—no matter how much he worked out to keep his mind clear, or how much he tried to acclimate to this new world order—all he could see in his mind were friends long gone and a world that he’d been ejected from. He didn’t ask for any of this. He didn’t ask to be woken up from the ice. He didn’t ask to be here. He had given his life to save everyone. Wasn’t that enough? How much more did he have to give?

“When Natasha and Loki were fighting… I didn’t see them,” Steve finally admitted. “We were on a train in Switzerland, trying to find Dr. Zola. Gabe went ahead to break into the control room. Me and Bucky took one of the other cars to take out the security… We got separated and then there was a lot of firing, and a guy with some kind of cannon. I heard Bucky shooting in the other car and my only thought was to get to him. He was all alone and someone was shooting at him and he was out of rounds…”

Steve took a deep breath and rubbed his temple. “I got the door open and tossed him my gun. I had my shield so I ran at the guy. I managed to knock him down, but Bucky finished him off… We thought that was it, but… the guy with the cannon recovered quicker than I thought. I told Bucky to get down. I told him.”

His fist clenched, and there was a tightening in his throat. “The blast knocked me down. It was only for a second, but when I looked up, Bucky had my shield and he was trying to shoot the guy… He couldn’t take the next blast… He flew out towards the opening before I could get up. I threw
my shield at the guy and he went down. I tried to get Bucky after. He was too far out for me to just reach and I tried—I really tried—to get out to him, to get his hand… The rail broke and then he…"

Steve replayed that moment in his head every night. And every night he thinks about all of the ways it could have gone differently. He should have braced himself for the first cannon blast. He should have pushed Bucky back further and made sure that he stayed down. He shouldn’t have wasted his time throwing his shield, because maybe—maybe—those few precious seconds would have made all of the difference. Every night he played that scene in his head, and every night he found a way to save his best friend. It just didn’t matter, though. Because he couldn’t do it when it counted.

“When I saw them fighting, I knew that it wasn’t anything serious. I knew that they weren’t hurting each other. But I just kept seeing little flashes of that day, of Bucky. They just kept fighting and… the pictures started to blur together until I wasn’t sure what I was seeing. I saw Bucky lying on the ground and the guy with the cannon standing over him. For once it seemed like there was enough time and maybe I could… I didn’t even realize it was Natasha until Loki pulled me off of her.”

He thought about the world coming back into focus around him. How the train car faded away, and the soldier with the cannon slowly transformed into Romanoff. He thought about how Bucky’s face slowly morphed into Loki. Those green eyes were so wide and confused. Steve didn’t know if he scared him or not, but he didn’t want to stay and find out. He didn’t want anyone to see him like that, least of all the only person left in the world he could consider a friend.


“I wasn’t aware it was a competition.”

“If I wanted a competition, I’d hang out with Stark and we’d find out who had the shittier dad. From what his last biography said, he’s got a lot of daddy issues and he hates to lose, so we could keep that shit going all night long.”

“From what little comparison I’ve got, I’d say you’d win.”

“You see, that’s what I thought too,” Clint laughed.

“…How do you do it? How do you manage to keep laughing about it?”

Clint thought about it for a moment, before he shrugged his shoulder.

“If you’re looking for some quick-fix-it answer then you’re going to be disappointed. My old man was an asshole. Like a pure, grade-A fucktard who shouldn’t have been allowed to have kids. Life was hell, but eventually the bad shit ended. I had my brother for support through most of it, and yeah, things were tough, but nothing ever lasts. Good shit, bad shit, it all ends at some point. You just can’t get stuck in one, otherwise you’re not going to move forward.”

“…So that’s what you think I should do? Just accept it, make my peace and move forward?”

“I’m not telling you to do shit,” Clint said. “If you want to stick around in the past and wallow in guilt for a while, that’s your prerogative. It’ll probably make you feel like shit, but if that’s where you are, then that’s where you are.”

“You don’t give a lot of advice, do you?”

“Nat says I shouldn’t be encouraged to.”
“She’s very wise in that.”

“She’s wise in a lot of things. Including recognizing the need to get help,” he looked pointedly at Steve.

“Does she think that I need help?”

“Do you?”

Steve didn’t want to answer that. Once again, Clint didn’t push him to.

“…I just want to stop feeling so disconnected.”

“I know the feeling. The best thing to help: stop trying to severe potential connections.”

“I thought you said you made your peace?”

“I did. That’s just the trouble I had with Natasha at first. She was like one of those stuck-up cats that would act like complete assholes.” Steve gave Clint a look of confusion. “You know, the really dick ones that will knock all of your shit off of the counters and scratch you if you try to pet it?”

“I’m more of a dog person.”

“Never get a cat then. Those bastards are evil. Anyway, Nat, yeah… she still tries to keep herself from connecting with anybody. She says that it keeps her neutral and aloof, but between the two of us, she just doesn’t want people to get close and know her. She’ll never tell me why, but I just know that she doesn’t trust easy.”

“You talk like the two of you are really close, though.”

“I wore her down with my bright charisma and my stunning smile. Is it working on you, too?”

Steve laughed, despite his down mood.

“No one can resist,” Clint said. “If you want to feel better, or just feel something that isn’t guilt, then talk to someone. Talk to a therapist, Nat, a VA group, or come pretend to get drunk with me and I’ll listen to whatever you have to say. Just don’t close yourself off and try to figure it out alone. That’ll just make it harder down the line.”

“Fair enough,” Steve nodded.

“Seriously, talk to your friends. It’ll help.”

“Kind of hard, seeing how all my friends are dead.” That was the first time he’d said it out loud. It was weird that it didn’t hurt as much as he thought it would. He just felt numb instead.

“That’s kind of harsh,” Clint said. “I like you. Natasha likes you. That weird alien dude seems to as well.”

“Loki,” Steve said. “…Is he alright? I should have apologized before I ran out like that.”

“He’s fine. Don’t worry about him. He spent most of the day hanging out with Banner and messing around the training room with Nat. They’re real girlfriends now.”

“Good. I was worried about him.” I shouldn’t have left him.
“He’s fine…Oh, but if you want to keep sticking around him, we’re probably going to need to head back to base soon.”

“What? Why?” Steve said in a mild panic. His mind began racing with the possibilities. Was Fury planning on doing something to him? Were the people he ran away from here to take him back? Shit! He knew he shouldn’t have left him!

“Relax, he’s fine. Got the order a few hours ago. Shit’s been going crazy in the lab and Banner is on the verge of Hulking out whenever they’re in the same room for too long. They think his weird alien magic might be the cause of it. He’s just being moved to the New York base until stuff gets straightened out. Nat and I are going too.”

“I’m going with him,” Steve said in a tone that left no room for argument. “I told Fury that I’d be responsible for him. I need to look out for him.”

“Natasha thought you might feel that way. That’s why she sent me out to get you. So come on, Old Glory. The Quinjet leaves soon.”

“Do we have a ride back?”

“Nah, we’re not too far. We can walk it.”

Clint stood and extended his hand down for Steve to take. Steve looked at it for a moment before accepting the help up. He left his flask down on the steps of the memorial. It wouldn’t do him good anyway.

“Since we’re trading stories, I’ll tell you about how me and my brother ran from the group home and joined the circus.”

“Seriously? That actually happens in real life?”

“I’m living proof.”

“What did you do?”

“A bit of everything. Cleaned animal shit, learned to throw knives, shoot a bow, some acrobatic stuff. Almost got to do the tightrope…”

The two men walked by the reflection pool, Clint speaking loudly about his days in the circus and occasionally earning a laugh from Steve. Soon, they were talking almost as if they didn’t have a care in the world. They didn’t notice the eyes watching them from the memorial. The man stepped out from the shadows and kept his good eye on the two men who were growing smaller in the distance.

He pulled his phone from his jacket pocket and notified his contact.

“The hawk and the captain are on the move.”

He waited a moment and then his contact answered.

“Confirmation of splitting powers has been given. Team in place. Be ready to reconvene in New York within three days.”

“Hail HYDRA.”

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The day had been an odd one for Loki. Starting with the interesting, snarky conversation with Stark and ending with Natasha telling him to pack up his possessions because they were moving locations. She would not tell him where, though. It mattered little to Loki. The sooner he was out of the watchful eye of their Director, the sooner be to completing his goal here on Midgard. Several days with these people had given him nothing but their suspicion and, in a few cases, their contempt. Though, if Loki had to admit it, he did enjoy the company of Natasha. She may have been trying to gain information from him for her own purposes, but she was the first person to give Loki a challenge in a spar… To be honest, she was the only person who had ever been willing to spar with him.

In Asgard, it would not have been proper for Loki to spar with any of the members of the Einherjar or the warriors in training. If they had won, they would have to endure Thor’s wrath for hurting his betrothed. If Loki won, it would have been considered improper and would have shamed the other. Natasha didn’t care about that, though. Loki found that to be both refreshing and oddly relaxing. There were no expectations on him here, no one cared. Loki found that he liked it very much.

He also found himself missing his Captain as the day wore on. Yes, he was relieved for the lack of the shadow following him around all day, but when in the company of people who distrust you so much, it is nice to have at least one person who is not suspicious. Loki hoped that he would return before too long. If he was going to be stuck on this realm for a while, then it wouldn’t hurt to have some tolerable company… Besides, he would feel foolish if he were the only person who didn’t understand the magical box these mortals keep in their dining halls to heat their food. It just seemed unnatural.

Speaking of unnatural, though, the revelations of his biology that afternoon had taken a toll on Loki. He’d known for the majority of his life that Odin had molded him to fit in with the Aesir, but he was mortified by the thought that the old bastard had mutilated him as well. He touched the spot on his forehead where his horns were supposed to be… The feeling of smooth skin left him feeling hollow.

There was something else, though. Using their simplified version of the Soul Forge, the doctor had managed to find something that either Eir never could, or that she kept hidden from him all these years. He found the source of Odin’s curse inside of him. It was an actual, tangible thing buried inside of his mind. He saw it with his own eyes, saw how it had repressed parts of his seidr…and if Loki could see it, if the mortals could somehow understand it, then perhaps there would finally be a chance that he could remove it.

The doctor was proving more useful than Loki ever thought he would. Especially considering that the good doctor contained the skrímsli inside of him. Oh yes, he will become very useful for Loki.

Just as Loki was finishing gathering the last of his armor together, he suddenly felt a sting on his chest. The prince hissed and rubbed at where the sensation was. As he did, his fingers brushed the Mjolnir pendant; the pendant that marked him as Thor’s betrothed, the pendant that no amount of seidr could remove.

Loki nervously went to the adjacent bathroom and removed his shirt. Looking into the mirror, he saw the silver pendant hanging from his neck as it always did, mocking him with its everlasting presence. Always there to remind him who he belonged to and what he was for. Scowling, Loki brushed the pendant aside to examine where he had felt the sting. He saw a slight mark there. Nothing extreme, just a faint scratch. It could have been nothing, he told himself. The pendant was old and had likely cut his skin from the corner of the hammer. It was nothing, he told himself again.
It was nothing.

In the back of his mind, he prayed that there was no thunder outside.

Chapter End Notes

Somehow this story is turning into the Avengers therapy sessions. Anyway, congrats on making it to the bottom.

Coming up, a lot of bonding with Loki and two alpha males butting heads. Stick with me for a while and there might be a trip to Coney Island in it for you ;)

Hail HYDRA
Hi, everybody! Sorry for the delay, but writer's block and seeking employment has taken its toll on me. I shall try to strive on for you, though, my lovelies!

The ride in the Quinjet had been a bit awkward for everyone, to say the least. They had departed from the DC base shortly after Barton and the Captain had returned. Rogers was only given thirty minutes to pack what little belongings he had before he, Loki, the two agents and Stark were all loaded onto the jet by Agent Coulson. Stark had at first seemed happy to be leaving the base, until he saw his travel companions. Once he laid eyes on Barton and Coulson, he became defensive, saying something about his rights and being detained. Everyone just tried to tune him out until he was strapped into his seat for take-off.

The Captain took his seat next to Loki, and the prince was quiet pleased to see that his friend had returned unscathed. Though, he still seemed to be a bit embarrassed around Loki. When they had first seen each other upon entering the Quinjet, Steve had tried to give Loki a smile, but he looked away too quickly for Loki to return it. Loki imagined that he was still affected by what had occurred between them the day before. He hoped that he would get over it soon, though, as, at the moment, Steve was his only true ally on this realm.

Operating the Quinjet were Barton and Romanoff. They were so focused on flying and carrying on their own private conversation, that they did not pay much mind to their passengers. Then there was Agent Coulson, there to keep an eye on the group and report back to Director Fury. At least, that is what he was supposed to be doing. Shortly after take-off, and after he had everyone accounted for, he began staring at Steve to the point where the Captain became uncomfortable. When Steve tried to diffuse the tension by saying hello, Coulson took that as an invitation to sit down and begin a conversation. Loki began to tune out when the Agent spoke about trading cards and a vintage film.

When Loki looked across the aisle, he saw that Stark was glaring daggers at him. It wasn’t something that Loki was unaccustomed to, but it made him curious. Loki raised an inquisitive brow to which Stark replied by narrowing his eyes. He made a gesture tilting his head to the empty seat next to him. Loki looked around to his other travel companions first. Everyone else was still preoccupied—Steve looking more uncomfortable by the second—so he didn’t see the harm in having a little conversation. He unbuckled the straps holding him down in his seat and slipped across the aisle to sit next to Stark, the other man watching his every movement with obvious suspicion.

“I know you have something to do with this,” Stark muttered as soon as Loki sat down.

“I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about,” Loki answered.

“Bullshit,” he scoffed. “You break into my room, literally disappear before my eyes, and the next thing I know, I’m being thrown on a plane with a bunch of crazy, overly patriotic assassins.”

“Surely you’re not lumping the good Captain into that category,” Loki said with a slight smile,
looking from Stark to Steve. “Captain Rogers would never hurt a harmless person.”

“The man willingly signed up to become a government lab project and has killed over 100 Nazis, so yeah, I think I’ll count him among the crazy people.” Stark paused for a second before he narrowed his eyes. “Did you just call me harmless? Bitch, I will tank-missile the shit out of you.”

“By the Norns, your ego is fragile,” Loki said with a roll of his eyes. A thought came to him suddenly and he couldn’t help but smirk. “Then again, given a man of your…stature,” he gestured to Stark’s smaller frame, “I suppose that shouldn’t be so surprising.”

Stark’s eyes widened a fraction before settling back into their murderous glare. Before the flight he had some time to speak to Natasha about his relocation and who his travel companions were to be. She didn’t divulge too much information about Stark—still wary about his and Loki’s possible connection—but she had mentioned a structure that he was building in the city that would scrape the edge of the sky. She then made an insinuation about the need for such a tall structure that had Loki laughing just thinking about it.

“What?” Stark asked when Loki tried to fight back a giggle.

It took Loki a minute to remember how she had worded it. “I was just thinking about your tower. Natasha told me about it, about how it reaches the clouds. I was just wondering what exactly it was that you were compensating for.” He finished by looking pointedly towards Stark’s lap.

The reaction was utterly beautiful. Stark’s eyes widened to perfect circles as his jaw dropped. At the same time, his hands flew to the buckle of his seat’s straps, as if it were the only thing holding him back from attacking Loki. It probably was.

“You little shit,” Stark growled. Loki just smiled.

“Hey!”

The sudden outburst from Steve made both men jump. They looked over to see Steve leaning forward in his seat, hands on his knees, face slightly red, and eyes narrowed, looking as if he was about to jump out of his seat and intervene. Loki hoped that this wasn’t going to be a repetition of his reaction with Natasha. Stark immediately put his hands up in a non-threatening manner. Coulson looked almost amused as he looked back and forth between the two men.

“Easy there, Cap-sicle,” Stark said. “We’re just having a conversation.”

“That wasn’t what it sounded like.”

“Then get your hearing checked. Me and Rock of Ages here are just talking. Back me up here,” he said, looking to Loki.

Loki just shrugged.

When Steve looked as if he was about to get up, Coulson placed a hand on his shoulder and softly shook his head.

“Children,” Natasha called from the cockpit. “Behave.”

“He started it,” Stark said, though no one knew which ‘he’ that he was referring to.

“Don’t make me pull this thing over!” Clint called back to them.
Coulson just looked frustrated as he let out a deep sigh. “World’s greatest team,” he muttered under his breath.

“You still haven’t told me what the hell is going on here, Coulson,” Stark complained. “You drag me out of my house saying that the world may be in danger, lock me in a lab for a couple of days, and now I’m being dragged God only knows where. I think I deserve some kind of explanation here.”

Coulson’s eyes narrowed on Stark after his outburst, while Loki’s ears perked up. What did these people exactly want with Stark, and why was that purpose suddenly abandoned?

“Alright, kids,” Coulson began, addressing all three men in the back, “this is how this is going to play out. We are going to SHIELD’s New York base—shut up, Stark,” he said when the other man opened his mouth to speak. “When we get there, Captain Rogers and Agent Romanoff will escort Mr. Laufeyjarson to his new quarters and act as his guards as they have been. During this time, Stark, you will be debriefed on all that you need to know. Is that clear?”

“Then what the hell am I doing here?” Clint called from the cockpit.

“Because you are,” Coulson answered. “Now, I’ve been put in charge of all of you, to ensure that we all do our assigned tasks. We do this, and, eventually, we will all be allowed to part our separate ways, never to see each other again if we so choose. But, this can only happen if we can all agree to get along, play nice, and not be a bunch of assholes. Can we all agree?”

“I make no promise,” Stark said, sitting back in his chair and crossing his arms.

“How about this, then. You don’t act like your usual self, Stark, and I won’t let Barton get trigger happy with the taser again. Deal?”

“What the hell is your fixation with tasers?”

Coulson just fixed him with a stare, indicating that he was up for no nonsense. Eventually, Stark cracked under it and let out a dramatic sigh. “Fine, I’ll play nice. But if Stars and Stripes here wants to start something again, I’m damn sure going to finish it.”

“I won’t try anything,” Steve said, “just as long as you stop threatening my friends.”

“Where the hell is everyone getting this idea that I’m threatening everyone?” Stark asked, obviously exacerbated. “Jesus Christ, I’m the one getting shocked and bruised by every damn member of SHIELD yet somehow I’m the threat.”

“Just watch yourself, Stark.”

Steve gave Stark another one of his stern looks. Stark rolled his eyes in return and looked back to Loki. “Please call your golden retriever off. I’m really not in the mood for this right now.”

“You must be truly desperate to come to me for help,” Loki said. In all honesty, he was enjoying the show of aggression between the two. It was just so foolish and petty that it made him want to laugh. Mortals were such odd creatures. At the same time, though, he didn’t want Steve to go through a relapse of whatever ailment that had affected him before. It would be a rather unfortunate set-back.

Stark gave him another desperate look, his big brown eyes shining. Loki hated himself for feeling just a little bit affected by it.
“It’s alright, Steve,” Loki told his friend. Steve still looked a little tense, so Loki raised a hand slowly in a non-threatening gesture, the way Natasha had done in the training room. “It is alright. Stark poses no threat to anyone, least of all me.”

“Sitting right here,” Stark muttered.

Loki ignored him and kept his focus on Steve. Slowly, his friend started to back down and relax in his seat, though he kept his glare focused on Stark. Loki gave him a soft smile in appreciation anyway.

“Are we all done now?” Coulson asked, looking pointedly between the three men. Steve and Stark didn’t say a word, but Stark huffed and looked away. Loki just shrugged at the man. “Alright then… Great talk.”

As the man sat back down, Loki took a moment to reflect on his current situation. Stuck with arguing, petty mortals who all believed they held some kind of power over one another and himself, but were all in reality a ticking time bomb, just waiting for a catalyst to set them off. Perhaps that was why he was sticking around when he could very easily be done with them all and get back to his life-long mission. He had always been drawn to the chaos.

Besides, he was in no rush. Asgard will still be there waiting for him.

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Asgard

The Einherjar were doing all that they could to control the screaming crowd, but the fear and chaos were rampant. As soon as the words Frost Giant were spoken, massive panic had erupted, and the people ran for their lives, fleeing without a real sense of direction. Several were crushed under the heels of the frenzied mob, while others were pummeled by frightened people trying to escape from Valaskjalf. So frightened and chaotic was the atmosphere of the room, that none could see the argument erupting between the Allfather and the newly crowned king of Asgard.

“Father, do not even think it,” Thor warned, raising Mjolnir.

“It is hard not to, when today of all days, our enemy decides to break our truce.”

“Perhaps they’ve seen that you’ve grown weak and vulnerable,” Thor countered. “I will break their spirits, just as you once did, but you will not lay a finger on Loki. He has done nothing. Look at him! He’s petrified.”

Odin’s eye shifted from Thor to look over his son’s shoulder. There he saw the Jotun prince clinging tightly to his queen’s arm, eyes darting about the hall while his mouth was parted in a look of fright. It was wrong to Odin. This was not the lying, conniving little trickster he had seen raised in his house. This was not the indignant little runt that had sworn his hatred to Odin and all members of his household. Despite the years of peace and seeming compliance that Loki appeared to have been showing, Odin knew the temper of the Frost Giants, and the grudges they could hold. This was wrong, and if Thor could not see it, then his son was as much blinded by stupidity as he was love.

When Thor saw that his father’s eye was not leaving Loki, he turned from him and walked to his mother and Loki. He reached out to put his hand on his mother’s arm and looked deep into her eyes.

“Mother, please, get Loki to safety. I will deal with these intruders and find you both when this is
done."

Frigga nodded to her son’s order and took Loki by the hand, intending to lead him out through the back door behind Hlidskjalf. Before she could lead him away, though, Thor caught his betrothed by the wrist and brought him close. Loki said nothing, but held a frightened look in his eyes as he stared up at Thor. The Thunderer put his hand to the back of Loki’s neck and put his forehead against the smaller man’s.

“Don’t be frightened,” Thor told him. “I promise that no harm will come to you. You will be safe, my love.”

Thor kissed Loki quickly, not noticing that his lips felt cold. When he pulled back, Loki remained silent, but nodded his head. Frigga took him by the hand again and led him away. Once they were safely through the door, Thor turned his attention back to his friends. Just as he’d hoped, Lady Sif and the Warriors Three already had their weapons drawn and were standing at the base of the dais, looking out over the crowd and waiting their king’s orders.

“Fandral, Volstagg, Hogun, help the Einherjar control this crowd. I’ll not have any more panic spreading. Lady Sif,” he called to her. When she turned to him, Thor gestured towards the door that his mother and Loki had exited through. “Guard this door with your life. No one goes in or out. If anything happens to Mother or Loki…”

Thor didn’t need to finish. Sif knew the consequences of anything happening to Thor’s beloved. As much as she resented it, she cared for and respected Thor enough to obey him in this duty. So she turned from him, raised her shield and gripped her spear tightly, slowly backing towards the door where the queen and prince Loki had gone through.

“Father,” Thor turned back to Odin, “where did you see the Frost Giants?”

“In the weapons vault. One had the Casket in his hands.”

Thor practically growled at the revelation, hand gripping Mjolnir tighter. He could feel her pulsing, angry and begging for release. And how he would give it to her. Soon, she would be drenched in Jotun blood.

Unfortunately, as Thor and his father examined the charred remains of three large Jotun foot-soldiers, he realized that Mjolnir’s thirst for blood would go unquenched. The vault was bare of any living creatures, save the two Aseir kings. At the foot of the vault lay one dead member of the Einherjar, his skin blackened from frost, with crystals of ice covering his parted lips. The man laid facedown, arm extended towards the door that he did not manage to reach in time. The man had tried to run. Thor had to spit on the corpse of the coward and feel some sort of comfort knowing that his soul resided somewhere among the honorless dead in Hel.

The other dead members of the guard they found had obviously been taken by surprise. Their swords remained sheathed and faces frozen in an eternal state of shock. These men Thor could not fault, and he silently hoped that their souls found peace in Valhalla.

As for the three Jotun, though, there was something odd about their placement that seemed curious to Thor. Their bodies, burned by the Destroyer, were thrown back against the walls on opposite sides of the vault, each one in an alcove containing an untouched weapon. Thor followed the burn marks with his eyes, though, and found that when they were hit by the Destroyer, they had been standing side-by-side, facing the Casket. He and Odin walked to the Casket, still placed on its
pedestal, and at the base lay the charred remains of the final Jotun intruder.

From what Thor could ascertain, the Jotun had been standing, facing the Destroyer as it was released. He had been holding onto the Casket as well, as several of his fingers had burned off and were still curled around the handles of the Casket. It was odd to Thor because, despite the unparalleled defenses of Asgard, the Destroyer would not be released unless commanded by the king, or if a person not of royal blood touched any of the weapons in the vault. Even then, it takes almost at least half a minute before the Destroyer is released... So, three Jotuns somehow manage to break into the vault, they catch the Einherjar unaware, grab the Casket and instead of running, they wait. They wait for the Destroyer to be released. Why?

“Something is not right here,” Thor finally said aloud.

“You are right in that,” Odin agreed. Thor looked over to see his father examining the room in the same manner he had been as well. “The door to the vault was still sealed. These Frost Giants were brought in another way.”

“Another way?”

“Yes. A portal was created here recently. A strong one at that, and all but nearly faded. The power of it thurns faintly in the air, but the signature is gone.”

Thor rolled his eyes and began to walk away from the dead Jotun and the Casket. He never understood when his father began to speak of his seidr, nor did he care to listen. It was a foul, deceitful practice that he felt slightly shamed by. His father conquered the realms through power, force, and blood. He did not need to rely on these petty tricks.

“Where do you think you’re going?” His father called.

“To gather our forces,” Thor answered without turning back. “Heimdall will take us to through the bridge and we will show Laufey what is done to those who cross us.”

“Thor!” His father shouted. The tone of his father’s voice was enough to halt him mid-step. “You will not take one step onto the bridge until we understand what has happened here.”

“Understand what has happened?” Thor repeated. “The Frost Giants have found a way into Asgard, that is what has happened! You said yourself that there was a portal created. The Jotuns must pay for what they have done!”

“They have paid, with their lives,” Odin reasoned. “The Destroyer did its work, the Casket is safe —”

“They broke into the weapons vault!” Thor shouted, stepping up close to his father. “If the Frost Giants had stolen even one of these relics—”

“They didn’t,” Odin interrupted.

“Well I want to know why!”

Why indeed. Why go through all of this trouble and not take something? Even the smallest weapon in the vault was capable of great power. Why create a portal into the most guarded place in all the nine realms, and wait for the Destroyer to do its task? Thor needed answers, now!

“I have a truce with Laufey,” Odin said. “He would not do this.”
“He just broke his truce! They know you are weak and vulnerable! Laufey may be mad, but he is still a Frost Giant, and therefore a threat to our realm.”

“…What action would you take?”

“March into Jotunheim, as you once did. Teach them a lesson! Break their spirits completely, so that they would never dare try to cross our borders again.”

“You’re only thinking as a warrior,” Odin scoffed.

“This was an act of war!”

“It was the act of but a few,” Odin retorted. “It was doomed to fail. We will find the breach in our defenses and it will be sealed.”

“We will find the breach by going directly to the source! These were Laufey’s men, acting under his order—”

“They may be his men, but Laufey would not attempt something like this. He has neither the strength of seidr nor the strength of will to do this, not while we hold what is most precious to him.”

“As king of Asgard—” Thor growled.

“But you’re not king!” Odin shouted, taking Thor off guard. “Not yet… If you wish to be king, then you must first behave like one.”

“You will not deny me my right, Father!”

“I can deny whatever I so choose,” he threatened. “If you continue to act like a brash child instead of a king befitting of this realm, then I can deny even the title of your princehood to you… However, if you listen to the wisdom I have to share and are willing to put your own personal feelings aside, then you shall be given your birthright.”

Thor took deep breaths, his nostrils flaring like a bull. His face was flushed red with anger and he had never thought in all of his millennia of life that he could ever strike his father, but he was overwhelmed with the feeling now. He knew he couldn’t, though. If he was to inherit the kingdom, then he would have to listen to what his father had to say.

“…What would you have me do, Father?”

Odin looked pleased. “You were on to something when you said that all was not right here. These Frost Giants did not come with the intention of getting out alive. The why of it alludes me for now, but I have an idea of where we will begin our search.”

“Heimdall?”

“Who else would see all?”

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“…An alien?” Tony said after a long pause. His look was disbelieving as he looked from the com-screen to Coulson and back. Coulson’s face gave nothing, but the enhanced image of Bruce through the screen gave him a sympathetic look.

“Yeah,” Bruce said slowly, rubbing the back of his neck nervously.
They'd arrived at the NY SHIELD base only two hours ago, but already Tony was exhausted beyond belief. Captain Righteous kept giving him glares whenever he’d tried to Loki on the Quinjet, making it hard to focus on anything. Even when he gave up on trying to get anything useful out of the other man, Rogers kept shooting him looks like he was about to feel up his little sister. It made Tony uncomfortable, to say the least.

To make matters worse, Tony wasn’t even given time to recover from the jet-lag. As soon as they landed, he was taken by Coulson to the private lab in the SHIELD base. It was almost half the size of the one in D.C. and the toys they had to play with there were so outdated that Tony wanted to cry. It wasn’t fair. Rogers, Loki, and the two agents all got to go rest while Tony had to get a boring debriefing on the situation, and then have to wait in the most awkward thirty minute silence with Coulson as they waited to get Banner on the line to bring Tony up to speed.

Tony perked up a little bit at the sight of his Science Bro. The other man looked more tired than he remembered, the lines under his eyes darker and the stubble on his face in obvious need of a shave. Whatever the hell they had him doing on the Tesseract looked as if it was taking a huge toll on Bruce, and it brought out a protective instinct in Tony that he didn’t know was there. It made him want to grab up the other genius and sweep him off to Aruba for a week…or at least have him Hulk out on SHIELD. Honestly, the man looks as if he could let off some steam once in a while.

When Bruce started talking about their mutual—friend? Would that be the proper word? More like science project—acquaintance, Tony was floored. The material Banner had collected on Loki had already been transferred over to the NY base, and as Bruce explained it all, Tony’s eyes grew so wide that Coulson was sure that they were going to pop out of his skull.

“He’s an alien?” Tony asked again. “Like a living, breathing, anal-probing alien from space?”

Bruce looked a little taken aback by that one. “Well…I can’t confirm the third one—I hope not, anyway—but yes, Tony, he’s an alien. He was not born on this planet, or, from the sounds of it, in this galaxy.”

“…Wow,” Tony said after another pause. “This is so cool. I mean, I knew there was something weird about the guy, but…holy shit!”

“What do you mean, weird?” Coulson asked, giving Tony a look.

“What?” Tony shrugged. “Weird as in…he’s weird. The guy shows up out of nowhere looking like a member of The Cure and he’s got Captain America following him around like a puppy. That’s weird.”

Coulson didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t say anything more.

“Yeah,” Bruce caught their attention again, “so that’s what we’ve got on him so far. You should be aware too, that he has some kind of strange power that he calls sedir—which is just magic in layman’s term. From what I’ve seen of it, it gives off faint gamma radiation, which may be what is causing the effect with the Tesseract…and also the reason why I can’t really get near him safely,” Bruce half laughed.

“So he brings out all of those special emotions inside of you?” Tony quipped.

“Stark,” Coulson said. Tony waved him off and kept focusing on Bruce.

“You could say that,” Bruce laughed again.

“Dr. Banner, aside from what you’ve learned of his anatomy, has Laufeyjarson revealed anything
else to you? His intent on this world, perhaps?"

“If you’re asking me whether he said anything about hacking into all of the world’s nuclear launch codes, then no it never came up. He told me basically the same story that Director Fury gave me. I also found some physiological evidence that could possibly back up his story.”

Bruce touched some things on his side of the screen, and soon Coulson and Tony were greeted with a picture of what seemed to be an enhanced view of someone’s pale skin, near their hairline.

“It’s kind of hard to tell with this picture, but if you look here,” Bruce touched something else and a portion of the skin was highlighted, “you can see some faint scar tissue.”

Tony squinted, and sure enough, there was a faint white line of a scar.

“Loki said that his race had horns, so this shows he was de-horned at some point. From what he said, and based on his appearance and the description he gave me of his race, I’d say it was for purely cosmetic reasons. He didn’t seem to know about it and got really upset when I explained it to him.”

Coulson nodded thoughtfully.

“There were other things too, like his teeth, but the biggest was this here.” After a moment, a picture of a brain scan appeared on the screen, showing what looked like a faint lesion. “Whenever Loki would use his magic, this would begin to pulse. And when he tried to shape-shift into what he said was his natural form, it actually grew.”

“What the hell is that?” Tony asked. “Some kind of suppressant tumor?”

“Well, that’s up to you to find out now,” Bruce said.

Tony gave a confused look and turned to Coulson. “Alright, I’ve got seven Doctorates, but you do realize that none of them is for Medicine, right?”

“Yeah…they don’t seem to take that as an answer,” Bruce said from his side of the screen.

“We’re not asking you to treat him medically,” Coulson explained. “We just want you to study him. See what he can do, what his strengths and weaknesses are—”

“And whether or not he can fit into one of SHIELD’s catsuits?” Tony asked.

“We’re not looking to recruit him,” Coulson said. Though, if he were being honest with himself, the thought of what he could do for the agency had crossed his mind.

“Oh, no, that was more for my own personal thoughts. He looks like he’s got some good curve on him.”

“And just for that, you’re now going to have an escort when you examine him.”

“What!? Come on, it was just a joke,” Tony groaned.

“We have a strict no sexual harassment policy here at SHIELD, and that applies to everyone involved with our operations. You’re no exception, Stark.”

“Coulson, please, I hate having people around me when I’m working. I’m just barely going to be able to tolerate my alien guinea pig.”
“Come now, Stark. If you’re going to work with us—”

“I don’t want to work with you.”

“—then you’re going to have to learn how to be a team player,” Coulson finished. “Besides, Captain Rogers won’t get in your way.”

“Oh hell no,” Tony shook his head. “No, he’s not coming in.”

“Captain Rogers and Laufeyjarson seemed to have built a semblance of trust, and he’s made it clear that wherever Laufeyjarson goes, he goes as well. So like it or not he’s joining you… Besides, your father never had trouble working with him.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed down to a near murderous glare while Coulson’s usually stoic face became smug. A tension filled the air so thick that it was nearly choking.

“Ok…” Bruce’s voice said from the screen. “I’m just gonna… Yeah.”

Bruce pressed a button, and the screen went black, leaving Coulson and Tony alone.

***

Loki knew something was off the moment he and Steve stepped into the new examination room. Agent Coulson had gone out before them, looking rather pleased with himself as he passed by them in the hallway.

“You seem happy,” Steve commented, looking over his shoulder.

Coulson stopped and turned back to the two men. Loki swore that he saw the man’s eyes practically sparkle as they landed on Steve.

“Well, when you’re in this line of work, Captain Rogers, you have to learn how to make your own fun.” Coulson gave them a grin—an actual, stunning grin—before turning on his heels.

“I think he’s in love with you,” Loki commented. Steve actually laughed at that.

“Well, he did mention something about watching me in my sleep,” Steve replied.

“That’s rather disturbing.”

“It’s ok. He said it was while I was in the ic—” Steve cut himself off abruptly and his smile dropped. “Before I woke up… Come on. Let’s just get this stuff with Stark over with.”

Steve’s tone was somber again. It had been that way since they had landed at the SHIELD base. Loki hadn’t noticed it right away, as they were accompanied by Natasha for their first hour. However, once they were put into their new bunks and left to settle in and unpack, Loki noticed that Steve was doing his best to avoid eye contact with him. Loki noticed his answers short. It confused the prince greatly, especially considering the man’s protectiveness of him on the Quinjet. Loki liked the man, but he couldn’t gauge his usefulness if Steve didn’t stop fluctuating between his moods.

Loki tried not to dwell on it too much as Steve led him in to the medical lab. It was smaller than the one he had spoken to Dr. Banner in, and there appeared to be different kinds of equipment than what the good doctor used to examine him with. In the center of the room, near an observation table, though, stood Stark. The man was wearing a deep scowl, bringing attention to the tiny lines
at the corner of his eyes. Loki marveled again at how much this man had changed in the time he had first met him. In his time on Midgard with Hermes, he had seen how the mortals grow, age, and die, so it was nothing new. Still, it amazed him that two decades on this realm had such a larger effect on him than centuries did on Asgard for Loki. So fragile, these creatures were.

When Stark noticed them entering the lab, he gave both men a forced, tight-lipped smile and snapped a rubber glove in place.

“Oh good, gan’ s all here,” Stark said. “Great. Ok, Loki, drop the pants and bend over. Gotta check around.” Stark commanded as he raised his index finger in a gesture that Loki didn’t understand, but Steve must have.

“Stark,” he practically growled his name.

“Easy there, Captain Tight-Shirt,” Stark said. “Just having some fun. See, alien-boy doesn’t even know what the hell I’m talking about.”

Alien-boy?

“…So, I take it that you know of me now?” Loki asked.

“Seeing how Banner can’t really be in the same room with you without working through his beautiful anger issues, SHIELD decided that it was time that I was brought into the loop. So,” Stark took a breath, looking Loki up and down curiously. “Should I be bowing? Building a shrine? Sacrificing some virgins? Is that why you brought the Cap with you?”

Loki shot his arm out when he felt Steve beginning to move behind him. While the thought of watching these two men beat each other to a pulp was an interesting one, Loki had no intention of spending his afternoon cleaning Stark’s remains off of the floor.

“No sacrifices will be required, thank you, Stark. But if you wish to stay in my good graces, then I suggest that you do not agitate my friend any more than you have.”

“So you two are friends then,” Stark asked, looking between them. “How the hell did that happen?”

“It is a rather long story.”

“Never mind then,” he said. “The sooner I get you out of here, the sooner I can get back to my own life.”

“Why isn’t there a doctor here?” Steve asked.

“Excuse you,” Stark scoffed. “Seven Doctorates over here. How many do you have?”

“I meant an actual doctor,” Steve said.

“Relax, Banner filled me in on what was up. Now come on,” he said to Loki. “I haven’t got all day.”

Loki did as he was told and approached Stark, seating himself on the examination table before him. Across the room, Steve took a seat near the door and watched intently. For the next hour, not much was said between the men, save for Stark giving Loki a few commands similar to what Banner had done to him. Instead of talking to Loki about what he was seeing through the scans, though, Stark made little notes in his clipboard. Whenever Steve would try to ask a question about what he was doing, Stark would just shush him and continue working. Loki found the whole affair rather boring.
When Stark was looking inside his head, though, Loki’s interest began to peak again. He saw on
the monitors again what Banner had shown him, that little line inside of his mind that pulsed
whenever he used his seidr. He wanted to know more about it. He needed to understand what it
was, and, if it was possible, if it could somehow be removed.

“Banner mentioned something about that,” Stark said when Loki asked about it. “He said it was
some kind of lesion. Not sure what, though. Looks like some kind of weird tumor to me. You don’t
smoke, do you? Or use a cell phone?”

“A what?”

“One of these,” Steve said as he pulled a thin, flat piece of metal from his pocket. He swiped the
front of it and the metal lit up, showing a screen. “It’s a way for people to talk to each other over
long distances.”

“Look at you keeping up on the times,” Stark said, his lip curving up to a smirk. “I figured you
would still be using carrier pigeons or good old Morse code.”

“I’m ninety-five, not dead,” Steve grumbled. He shoved the phone back into his pocket and crossed
his arm over his chest. His fist was shaking again, Loki noted. Best to keep on the subject at hand.

“That lesion inside of me. Can it be removed?” Loki asked.

Stark laughed a little before answering. “Well, I may rock at Operation—never once touched the
sides—but I’m not exactly a brain surgeon. Something like this isn’t really my area.”

“But if you took me to one of these people, could they remove it? Is it possible?”

“I honestly don’t know,” he shrugged. “From what I see here it’s in there pretty deep.”

“Can it be removed!?” Loki asked more forcefully.

“Jesus,” Stark said. “I don’t know! God…Why, is it killing you or something?”

“Stark!?” Steve said.

“What!? I’m just asking. He’s the one acting like he’s about to die—”

“—It is,” Loki cut him off. Both men stopped and looked to him. “It is killing me. It is keeping me
locked in this shell,” Loki held out his arm, showing his pale skin. “It is keeping me trapped in this
skin, and I won’t be free until it’s gone. So yes, it is killing me.”

“…Ok,” Stark sighed. “A bit dramatic for my taste, but ok… Look, I don’t know what the hell this
thing is. I could talk to Coulson and see if he can arrange someone who actually specializes in this
stuff to take a look at it, but to be honest,” he stopped and sighed again. “To be honest, you’re not
something that this world has ever seen before. Hell, I’m not even supposed to know about this
shit. Even if they did get someone in here just willing to cut your head open and look around…they
might not be able to help you. I understand that you’re frustrated, ok, I do. But if you want my
help, you’re going to have to work with me here and help me understand what it is that I’m dealing
with.”

Frustrated? He understood that Loki was frustrated? The man had no idea what Loki was feeling.
He didn’t know what it was like to be locked away for centuries, to be lied to all of his life and
used as a pawn by an unfeeling tyrant. He didn’t know what it was like to be abused and scarred in
a way that could never be repaired. Loki’s patience is almost at his limit, and there is only so much
more he can take before he snaps and leaves these people burning before returning to his true task.

Stark must have noticed Loki’s annoyance, because the man gave a deep sigh and ran his hand through his hair.

“I’m sorry, ok,” Stark said. “I’m sorry that they’re keeping you here. I’m sorry that you’re having to go through all of this shit. And I’m sorry that my bedside manner isn’t making this any easier for you. I want to help you, I do—”

“No one can help me,” Loki said. “Least of all you.”

Loki expected the man to snap at him, but instead he got a strange look in his eye. One that Loki himself had whenever he saw a chance for mischief.

“That sounds like a challenge,” Stark said, the corner of his lip curving upward slightly. It was a familiar look on him. One that Loki had vague memories of from a night long ago, when they were both younger and naïve.

“It may be,” Loki said, and he returned the smirk.

“Sweetheart, I am not one to back down from a challenge.”

“So I remember,” Loki whispered.

Stark smiled then. An actual smile, free from sarcasm or thinly veiled discontent. It was a nice smile. One that Loki remembered fondly. It only grew when Loki returned the gesture. He realized then that, maybe, Stark remembered too.

“Am I missing something here?” Steve spoke up from across the room.

Loki and Stark both dropped their smiles and looked to Steve. The captain was watching the two of them with a confused expression. He was also beginning to stand up from his chair, looking as if he were weighing the options of approaching them or not. While Loki appreciated that this man would make a fine guard, now was not the time.

“Sjá ekki, heyra ekki,” Loki said.

Loki raised his hand and watched as his seidr flowed from him. The green mist wafted from him, drifting to Steve’s eyes and ears, and towards various points of the room. Stark watched closely, eyes growing in amazement as the mist traveled throughout the room, swirling over the machines and the men inside. When it came too close to his face, though, he waved his hand at it, trying to dissipate it. This shit was cool, but he didn’t know if it was some kind of weird alien poison, or if Loki was some kind of alien who farted out of his hands… Ew. That was a weird image he conjured for himself.

“It won’t hurt you,” Loki said. “Relax.”

“What the hell was that?”

He looked back to Steve to see if the man was just as confused as he was, but the captain had sat back down in his chair, looking disinterested at the whole scene in front of him.

“My seidr,” Loki answered. “I cast a small spell, one that distorts the senses.”

“Distorts how?”
“Anyone watching us now, Captain Rogers included, will not be able to see or hear what goes on between us. It deceives the eyes and lets a person see only what I want them to.”

“So…anyone watching us right now?”

“Will see nothing but you performing your experiments on me.”

“You’re fucking kidding me, right?” Stark laughed. Loki rolled his eyes and shook his head. To test it out, Stark walked up to Steve and began snapping his fingers in front of the man’s face. The man did not respond. He seemed to have no clue as to what the other man was doing, his eyes unfocused and watching something across the room that wasn’t there.

“Holy shit, that’s cool,” Stark laughed again. “I’ve gotta write that down.”

He cut back across the room and picked up his tablet, and began writing something with fervor with his stylus.

“Stark,” Loki said with annoyance. “This spell costs a lot of energy and will not hold for long. A reason why I do not do it often.”

“So why did you do it now?”

“Because I wanted to talk.”

“Really?” Stark quirked an eyebrow. “I thought I didn’t have anything of value to offer?”

“You must have something to offer, if Coulson feels that you’re trustworthy enough to handle me.”

“Trustworthy?” He laughed. “Oh no. I’m more of a last resort. Lucky me.”

“Why are you here?” Loki asked.

“Why are you?”

“If I tell you, are you going to tell your commanders?”

“Hey, let’s get one thing straight; I don’t work for them. I’d really rather not be here at all. In fact, I’m about two more electroshocks away from breaking out of here and going full lock-down in my tower.”

“Then why stay?”

“…Because—strictly as a man of science—you intrigue me. They did bring me in on something else, but then I started to stumble on you and it struck my curiosity. I thought that you were some kind of weapon that SHIELD was working on or something, but who knew the truth would be much weirder. Is it true about the whole horse thing?”

“How is it that everyone in the Nine has heard of that rumor before me?” Loki scoffed. Stark looked at him pointedly, waiting for an answer. “No, it is not true. I have never lain with a horse, nor have I birthed any.”

“Good to know. So how about you? Why are you sticking around?”

“I don’t know what you mean, Stark.”

“Please knock it off with that Stark shit. It’s just Tony. You’re a supposedly advanced race, I
shouldn’t have to repeat this.” Loki rolled his eyes at the man, and Tony gave him a sly smile. “So seriously, from what Bruce wrote up about you, and from what I’ve seen of your magic tricks so far, you could walk out of here and never come back. What’s got you sticking around?”

*How to answer this?

“Do you know what would happen to me if I were to just disappear from them after all of this?” Loki asked.

“No.”

“Neither do I, Tony,” he said, looking away from Tony with feigned nervousness in his eyes. “I came to this realm to get away from my enemies, not make more. The ones I escaped from may never notice me missing, but that is a rather large risk, and from what Steve has told me, Director Fury has no problem sacrificing me for the sake of his people—which I cannot blame him for. However,” Loki took a deep breath.

“I don’t want to go back to Asgard, Tony. I would rather die than go back. So, I will remain here and do whatever they require of me. If I go along with what they wish for me to do, then perhaps—should the day come that the Aesir come to claim me—at least a few members of SHIELD will be willing to help me stay.”

“…Subterfuge, huh?” Tony asked. “Pretend to be a meek little lamb and hope that it’ll work in your favor?”

“It has in the past,” Loki smirked.

“Face of an angel, mind of a devil,” he laughed.

“I’ve been called such before. I am happy to see that the mortals of this time are not so quick to burn and destroy what they feel is different.”

“Don’t be so quick to judge that one. People are always afraid of what is different or what they don’t understand. It’s just human nature.”

“Not just humans,” Loki muttered.

“This is depressing,” Tony laughed. “How much longer is your little spell going to last?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “A few more minutes, most likely.”

“Ok then, I’ve got a really important question. One that requires your full honesty since no one is watching us.” Tony leaned back against a counter-top and looked Loki in the eye.

“What is your question?”

“Why did you never call me back?”

“What?”

“Since we had our little late-night rendezvous, bits and pieces started coming back to me about that night. Granted, I was fairly drunk when I was hitting on you, but I remember some of it. Like how we danced, you were really cryptic about some shit that kinda makes sense now, and I gave you my number after we, uh…”

Tony didn’t have to finish. Loki remembered too.
“But yeah, I think I remember waiting for a while, wondering if I would ever see you again. But, yeah, no calls. Though, the fact that you’re an alien just passing through is a pretty good excuse.”

“If it means much, I did want to see you again,” Loki answered honestly. “Blame it on the alcohol or the heat of the moment, but I did want to see you again after that night. Unfortunately, your caretaker had other ideas.”

“My caretaker?”

“A rather large, angry looking man. He came looking for you and pulled you out of there.”

“Obie—” Tony cut himself off. “I mean, Stane. What does he have to do with it?”

“When he took you away, he took your number with him. I can’t remember everything, but the basics of it were that if he ever saw me near you again, he would kill me. I didn’t think it was worth the trouble after that.”

Tony looked at Loki for a long moment before he let out a laugh. This one wasn’t full of the mirth that the ones before were, though. This one sounded empty and hollow. Almost sad.

“Stane said all that to you?” Tony asked. Loki nodded again. “That fucker…”

“I take it that he is no longer your guardian?”

“Oh no,” Tony shook his head. “No, he’s uh… He’s not around anymore.”

Loki wanted to ask what had happened to the man, and how Tony was able to get rid of him. Tony’s silence and change in mood made him think better of it, though. He didn’t know exactly what Tony’s relationship was to that man—perhaps it was something similar to what he shared with Hulda—but it obviously didn’t end well.

“…But, if that hadn’t happened, I would have called you,” Loki said. He didn’t know exactly why he said it. He didn’t even know if it was true, if he were being honest with himself. He did, however, like the way Tony’s expression brightened just a little after he said it.

“Really now,” Tony smirked again. As annoying as it was, Loki believed that he preferred this expression rather than the sad one he was just sporting. “And why is that?”

“Because,” Loki paused and gave Tony a look up and down. He seemed to like that. “You intrigued me.”

Oh, how Tony liked that answer. The man’s smirk grew back into that sly, charming smile as his eyes narrowed a bit. Loki knew that look. He’d seen it on his betrothed’s face one too many times in his life to know what would be coming next. Of course he was proven right when Tony pushed off of the countertop and moved toward him. He came close to Loki, bending down so that he could put his arms on either side of Loki and be eye-level with him. Loki knew how to play this part, so he tilted his head to the side just enough to expose his neck. He wasn’t surprised when he saw those brown eyes dart to his exposed skin.

“Do I still intrigue you?” Tony asked, his voice low and almost husky.

The prince forced a blush to his cheeks and looked away briefly. It was a sweet, endearing look, so he’d been told. He had also been told that it was made much more alluring whenever he bit just slightly on his lower lip. It was a look of innocence, but also contemplation. Is sweet, virginal little Loki having impure thoughts? What will it take to push him over the edge? It was a look that he
had used on Thor many times, and each one with the same result; Loki would be molested, but in the end he would gain the upper hand.

So to finish off his little display, Loki gave a breathy whisper, “Perhaps.”

Tony’s eyes darkened and he leaned in closer. Loki didn’t back down, but his eyes stayed focused on Tony—on his eyes and his lips—as the other man drew in closer. Tony didn’t stop until he could feel his panted breath on his own lips and their noses were almost touching. The trap had been set, now all Loki had to do was wait for Tony to—

“Cool,” Tony suddenly said. He pulled back from Loki and stood up straight, smiling as if nothing had just happened. To say that Loki was confused would be a bit of an understatement, and it must have showed, because Tony laughed.

“Nice try there, Temptress,” he laughed again.

“What do you mean?”

“The shy little doe eyes were a nice touch, but I’ve seen better. Like Natasha. She’s a little more subtle about it. You might want to talk to her and get some tips if you’re going to work the whole subterfuge angle.”

*This one is cleverer than I gave him credit for.*

“I’ll be sure to do so,” Loki said, giving Tony his mischievous smile.

“You’re going to be a problem for me, aren’t you?”

“Most likely,” he said with a shrug. “You mortals did title me the god of mischief for a reason.”

Tony gave out a heavy sigh. “Fuck… Jesus, I just want to go back to my lab, work on my suits and let life get back to normal.”

“Then tell Coulson you’ve found all you needed to about me and leave. It seems simple enough.”

“It never is,” he shook his head. “They seem really interested in your magic shit, which likely means that they have plans for it. That’s why they need me for it. It’s too much like—” Tony cut himself off suddenly and his eyes widened a fraction. Loki narrowed his eyes.

“Too much like what?”

“Nothing,” he shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. Worry about yourself right now, because if you’re expecting SHIELD to let you stay here out of the goodness of their hearts, then you’ve got a big surprise coming to you. Nothing comes for free with them.”

“That is an unfortunate fact of life, Tony. No matter where you are, everything comes for a price.”

“Oh yeah,” Tony said. “What price was it that you didn’t want to pay that led you here?”


“Well…shit.” Tony looked uncomfortable again. Loki knew how he felt, and he realized again what he was trying to escape from, and the price he would pay if he failed.

“…Yeah.”
Silence fell over them again, and this time, Loki looked away from him. He thought about Asgard, of the people gathered together in Odin’s great hall, cowering in fear on what should have been a glorious day. He thought of the three Jotunar that his mother had sent to their death for him and his grand plan. He thought of Laufey waiting for him, so eager to hold his child again and trusting that Loki would somehow be able to succeed where he himself could not. He thought of Hermes, his closest friend and confidant, waiting for him diligently in the Cave of Time, praying for Loki to succeed… The weight of it all rested on Loki’s shoulders, and if he failed, then it would not only be him who paid the price.

Loki nearly jumped when he felt the hand on his shoulder, breaking him out of his thoughts. He looked to see Tony standing there over him, hand gently on his shoulder in an attempt to be comforting. When Loki turned to look at it, though, he pulled it back.

“Sorry,” Tony said. “I know you don’t like the whole touching thing, it’s just that… Shit,” he said nervously. “Look, I kind of suck at saying the right thing, so… Yeah, can we just go back to you trying to seduce me? I think I liked that better.”

Despite the situation, Loki let out an unexpected laugh. An honest one that lit up his features.

“You had a nice smile back then too,” Tony commented. Loki stopped laughing and looked up at him. “Again, most of that night is fuzzy…but I remember you had a great smile. Still do, I guess.”

“…I remember that I liked yours as well.”

Forgetting where they were and what they were meant to be doing, they stopped and just smiled at one another. And for a brief moment, Loki remembered why it was that this mortal had captured his attention that night.

“I’m missing something again, aren’t I?”

Both men turned when they heard Steve’s voice from across the room. The captain looked confused and his eyes were focused on the two of them again, so Loki knew that his spell had dropped. His privacy with Tony was done for the day.

“Nope,” Tony said. “Just letting E.T. here know that we’re done for the day. I’ve got all I need for now, so you can both stop being pains in my ass.”

“Trust me, Stark, we don’t want to be around you any more than we have to,” Steve said with a roll of his eyes.

“Whatever,” Steve sighed. He stood up from the chair and stretched his arms over his head, groaning slightly when he heard the bones pop. Loki took a moment to indulge himself in the view of the captain’s shirt rising slightly, revealing muscle, skin, and a small bit of hair leading lower. He couldn’t help but think again how so like the Aesir Steve was.

“You ready, Loki?” He asked. “I’m getting kind of hungry. Figured you might be too.”

Loki perked up at the mention of food. He really wanted the Midgardian pizza again. He nodded to Steve and got up from the table.

“You kids have fun,” Tony said. Loki looked behind him to see that he was wearing that strained, forced smile again, the one that he seemed to reserve strictly for Steve. “Same time tomorrow, Loki?”
“Do I have a choice in the matter?”

“I don’t think either of us do.”

“Then I will see you tomorrow, Tony.”

When he looked back to Steve, he didn’t miss the captain’s scowl. Whatever was going on between his friend and Tony, Loki didn’t know, nor could he really venture to guess. Whatever it was, though, it too much fun to pass up. So, Loki took Steve’s arm in the way he had taken Thor’s whenever he had escorted him to court. Either Steve didn’t mind or didn’t know what to say, because he allowed Loki to hold on to him and lean on him, before he escorted him out. Loki didn’t need to look back to know that Tony was now glaring daggers at them.

Perhaps Stark was right. Maybe Loki really was just a little shit.

***

Sitting alone in his office, Alexander Pierce watched intently as the monitor displayed the extraterrestrial walking out of the med lab arm-in-arm with Captain America. It was an interesting development, to say the least. What was even more amusing was the indecent gesture that Stark made once the two were gone. Though no one was able to determine the connection between Stark and the extraterrestrial yet, Pierce couldn’t imagine it to be as invested as Coulson and Romanoff believed it to be. Everything that he saw on the monitor appeared to be straightforward and professional between the two of them. Stark only seemed to be agitated by Rogers. That may prove useful later.

Many were rather perplexed when it was discovered that Rogers had survived not only the crash, but his time in the ice. None more so than Alexander Pierce, though. Still, the times and methods may have changed, but Rogers had not. He was still a soldier, still believed in laying down his life for his country. So when Fury came to him, explaining that Rogers could be an asset to SHIELD, Pierce had agreed. With Rogers on their side, following their orders, the organization may finally be able to advance into their final phase. As it was, though, Rogers was proving to be a problem. He was unstable—both mentally and emotionally—and was not willing to comply with Fury’s desire to reenter the world.

Perhaps it was for the best. After all, Rogers didn’t belong in this new world. The one he belonged to was long gone, torn down to make way for this one, and all Rogers was is a ghost. A man out of time.

Pierce turned off the monitor when he heard his phone begin to ring. He had been waiting on his contact all day.

“You’re late,” Pierce said as a way of greeting.

“I apologize, sir,” the voice on the other end said. “Banner was busy debriefing Stark, and Selvig is slowly beginning to lose it.”

“He has managed to get it stabilized, hasn’t he?” Pierce asked.

“The assumptions were correct, sir. The Tesseract began to become more stable once the extraterrestrial was moved.”

“Interesting,” he nodded. “And Banner has become more stable as well?”

“He has, sir.”
“Good. We’ve come too far now for any wildcards.”

“Shall we move on having the extraterrestrial taken out, sir?”

“No,” he said. “There may be a good use for him. I’ll have Stark keep up work on his magic, and see if there is a way to control it.”

“Phase 2 is almost ready to be put into motion, sir. Do we have time to wait for Stark to develop something?”

“I’ll give him an extra incentive. Smerdyakov will be arriving soon. If Stark can’t come up with something, then we’ll need him.”

“Captain Rogers still won’t let the extraterrestrial out of his sight, then?”

“Well, you said that it would be unlikely that he would.” Pierce said with a sigh. “Rogers will be taken care of soon enough. Just be sure to have Selvig and the Tesseract ready at my command.”

“And Banner?”

“Too unpredictable.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Very good,” Pierce smiled. “When this is over, I’ll personally see to it that you receive the recognition you deserve.”

“That is very kind of you, sir, but peace is not an achievement, but a responsibility.”

Pierce had to smile at his own words being quoted to him. “All for a more secure world.”

“Hail HYDRA.”

“Hail HYDRA,” he said.

Pierce hung up the phone and smiled to himself. It was almost ready. The new world order that took seventy years to create was almost upon them. All he had to do to ensure its success was to make sure that HYDRA’s greatest threat remained neutralized. Rogers may have thought that it ended that day with Schmidt, but if you cut off one head, two more will take its place. Rogers was alone in this world. He doubted that anything would grow in his place.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the bottom!

What am I even doing anymore? Coming up: HYDRA infiltrates and plots, and Pierce makes Tony an offer. Stay tuned!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I am a terrible, terrible person and I'm sorry that I took so long! Real life is a bitch, but I promise I'm not giving this up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It had been three weeks now since Tony had been—kidnapped—recruited by SHIELD, and he was beginning to get cabin fever from being cooped up in the med lab. His days consisted of examining Loki, avoiding any snark from Stars n’ Stripes, writing up reports, and trying to talk to JARVIS while huddled up in his bathroom. The engineer was beginning to go crazy. He missed his tower. He missed his suits, his bed, JARVIS, Dum-E, Pepper, and not being handed things. Mostly, though, he missed Pepper. Despite their occasional bickering, she was the closest thing that Tony had to a best friend, and he missed talking to her and bugging her throughout the day. Tony Stark was a man who liked his privacy, but even he couldn’t ignore the lonely feeling of being stuck inside SHIELD without any company.

The mornings checking over Loki were somewhat entertaining, scientifically speaking. The alien’s weird magic did all sorts of neat tricks that gave off waves of gama radiation. Tony had fun writing down everything and imagining what it could be like to somehow combine the force of that energy into his suits. He was already doodling possible schematics on the edges of his clipboard, trying to think of a way to balance the energy with that of his arc reactor.

Aside from the science factor, though, his tests with Loki were becoming a daily chore that he was beginning to dread. Loki hadn’t done that spell again, so the two of them weren’t able to talk as freely as they had that first day. With either the captain or Natasha in the room, it was hard for them to even make much conversation without it being scrutinized. With the captain, the two of them could make the occasional comment and have the other know that it meant something a little more—leaving the two of them exchanging a smug look—but having Natasha in with them was like having Fury. Every little word that could be exchanged was over-analyzed and examined. Tony would rather not have them knowing about their shared past. He knew that Fury would end up blowing it out of proportion and then Tony would never be allowed to go home. Yeah… he’d rather not suffer through that.

Even so, Tony thinks that he hates having the captain there the most. It wasn’t just the way he would jump like a damn guard dog whenever Tony and Loki were bantering, or the way Loki liked to leave on his arm—and he just knew that little bastard was doing it on purpose. He just hated having him there in general. He hated looking at this man—this lab project—and being reminded of the man his father admired more than anyone in the world.

Growing up, Tony's dad had always been distant and emotionally closed off. Even in his earliest memories, Tony had always remembered how closed off his father was to him and his mother, Maria. If Tony wasn’t being pawned off to the nanny while the couple hit some social event, then he’d be playing “the quiet game” with his mom while dear old dad was locked away in his lab. When he was little, he liked to sneak inside and see what it was that his dad was up to. Most times, he was working on some sort of new weapon design for the US military, but once in a while, Tony saw him bent over his desk, marking notes on a map of the ocean, trying to pin down some sort of
location.

His dad would always find him, of course, and proceed to yell at him for interrupting his “important work” before handing him off to the housekeeper. Howard would never even spare a look to Tony once he was out of his hands. As soon as he was headed towards the door, Howard would go back to whatever project he was working on, or go right back to that map. When he asked his mom about it, she would always smile sadly and tell him that Howard was looking for an old friend.

When Tony had the coordination, he started building things to try to get his dad’s attention. At age four he had built his first robot. A wind-up toy made from the scrap metal in his dad’s shop. He remembered jumping for joy when he first got it to work, before he ran to show his dad. Howard managed to spare him a full minute of his time to watch as the little robot took three steps and shot a little plastic piece that Tony called a missile. He had been so proud and looked up at his dad with a bright smile, hoping to see some kind of approval from him. All he got was a nod and a quick, “That’s great, champ,” before Howard retreated back into his workspace to look over his maps.

For years Tony tried so hard to get something—anything—from his father. He built things, he studied things, he proved himself a certified genius by age six, and was already doing college entrance exams by age eleven. Nothing was ever enough to tear his dad away from his gadgets or his maps, though. By the time he was twelve he’d had enough of trying to become Howard’s perfect son, so he went the other way. He acted out slowly at first; not listening to his mom, housekeepers or private tutors. He broke things, threw tantrums, and was an all-around little shit. Still, all Howard would give was a sigh before turning around and locking himself in his shop.

At fourteen, Tony decided to find a way to just make himself not care. The solution for that problem came when he swiped the champagne from the wait staff at his mother’s charity gala and Mrs. Stephenson while her husband mingled. Alcohol made him forget the pain of rejection, and fucking made him feel wanted. It seemed like a good solution. For the next few years, there was rarely a moment of clarity in Tony’s life. Rarely a moment where he didn’t have a bottle in one hand and a willing body in the other. Half of what he did, he barely had any memory of and the things he did remember were often the things that made headlines. Oh, how Tony became a tabloid darling during that time.

Just before his sixteenth birthday, Tony had his first overdose. Much to his own surprise, his dad was actually there when he woke up in the hospital. Even though he was in pain from having his stomach pumped and drugged out of his mind, Tony remembered that exchange more clearly than anything with his dad.

“Well look who deigned to show his face. What happened? Are they naming a wing after you?”

“How are you feeling?”

“Like the fucking king of the world,” he laughed.

“…Tony, the doctor said you could have died.”

“…Good to see you found that important enough to be dragged away from the office.”

“This is serious, Tony.”

“So am I.”

“…What do you want from me, son?”
Tony took a deep breath and thought a long time about his answer. “I want you to be a fucking father. Greet me when I come home. Ask me how my fucking day went. Take an interest in my life instead of treating me like a show-pony when it’s convenient for you and ignoring me when it’s not…Fucking be there for me instead of looking for your dead friend.”

Howard was quiet for a while after that. Tony felt a tear stinging his eye and fought it off. After a while, Howard got out of his chair and turned towards the door. Because he was a Stark, though, he had to leave with the final word.

“At least he never disappointed me.”

That was the last real conversation Tony had with his dad. Howard and Maria were killed in a car crash a year later, and Tony was given the keys to the Stark kingdom.

The first thing he did was burn all of his dad’s old maps.

It may have been petty and stupid, but every time Tony was forced to be in the same room as Rogers and see that idiot brooding, it brought up the old resentment that he felt towards Howard. This was the man who stole his father from him.

So when Tony was summoned to Pierce’s office to discuss the man, well, he was less than enthused.

Pierce had called him in early that afternoon to have an update on his progress with Loki. He had sat Tony down and offered him a tumbler of Scotch, but the conversation quickly turned from Loki to Rogers.

“What exactly is your impression of Captain Rogers?”

“Why the hell are you asking me?” Tony scoffed.

“Well, aside from Agent Romanoff, you seem to be the one spending the most time with him,” Pierce shrugged, before topping of his drink.

“Not by choice,” he mumbled into his drink. “He won’t let Loki out of his sight.”

“The extra-terrestrial?”

“Do you have any other Lokis working here?”

“At least two,” he answered. “He have recruiting centers in Norway and Iceland.”

“Good to see that you guys are expanding your options.”

“We’re always on the lookout for a good agent.”

“So what the hell do you guys have me here for?”

Pierce laughed at that and shook his head. “If it makes you feel any better, I was against having you here myself, but Fury seemed insistent.”

“Don’t you outrank him?”

“I do, but after all of these years, I’ve learned that it’s just better to let Nick have some leeway from time to time… However, I am a bit concerned over his decision to include Rogers.”
“Really?” Tony laughed. “I thought everybody and their grandmother was creaming their panties over the Cap.”

“Captain Rogers is a true American hero,” Pierce nodded, “and his contribution to his country can never be repaid… However, seventy years has passed. The world has moved on, and unfortunately Captain Rogers hasn’t had that luxury.”

“Well, being a Popsicle will do that to you.”

“While Director Fury’s willingness to get Captain Rogers back into the world is noble, I’m afraid that his current mental status has most of the council a bit concerned.”

“The cap is cuckoo?”

“No, no,” he shook his head gently, in an almost patronizing way. “We just believe that Rogers has been through a traumatic event and may not yet be ready for the pressure that Fury is putting on him.”

“What pressure? Following Loki like a puppy and being a pain in my ass?”

“Being in a high-level stress area such as SHIELD,” he explained. “There has already been an incident involving him and Agent Romanoff.”

“He tried to take on the Widow?”

“He did more than that,” Pierce said, his voice deathly serious. “He managed to incapacitate her for several minutes. She’s lucky she wasn’t hurt.”

Now that surprised Tony. Natasha was a tiny woman, but as he always knew, big things tend to come in small packages. That woman was probably the deadliest person he’d ever met, and if she was taken down, then there was a serious problem.

“She okay?”

“It’s hard to ever get a straight answer out of Romanoff, but the incident has gotten my attention,” he said. “Captain Rogers is a damn fine soldier, hell he’s the greatest weapon your father ever gave us.”

Tony tried to ignore that comment.

“But every weapon has its flaws,” he continued. “And right now, the Council feels that Captain Rogers is a ticking time-bomb.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed and he took another sip of his Scotch, a stalling tactic he used as he thought over Pierce’s words.

Pierce smiled, and Tony felt a shiver go down his spine. “The specifics of Project Rebirth were lost a long time ago, and, as your father was one of the founding members of SHIELD, his work was never officially entered into our databases. But, it’s doubtful that they’ve disappeared completely…”

“What exactly are you asking me to do?”

“I’m asking you, Mr. Stark, to diffuse the bomb.”

Though his instructions were open to interpretation, there was a strong implication of what exactly
Pierce was asking. The question was, though, could Tony do it? Could he undo his father’s greatest achievement?

When Tony didn’t answer him right away, the smile slowly fell from Pierce’s lips. As it did, his brows furrowed a bit in worry.

“I understand that the Council is asking a lot from you, Mr. Stark, but I assure you that if you’re willing to work with us, then you have my personal guarantee that SHIELD will never come knocking at your door ever again.”

“Really?” Tony scoffed.

“You have my word,” he nodded. “There will be no more congressional hearings, no more attempts at patent blocking, no more SHIELD agents dropping in on you, and no more consulting for as long as you wish. Do we have a deal, Mr. Stark?”

“…I want one more thing,” Tony said, sipping down the rest of his drink.

“Name it.”

“It’s not for me, but for Loki.” Pierce looked a touch confused, so Tony clarified. “The alien.”

“What about him?”

“It’s in the file, but Banner and I both found something on his CT scans. Some kind of lesion in his brain that may be effecting him. I want to bring someone in to look at it.”

“Given the current event of things, I don’t believe we have time for any exploratory procedures—”

“It’s that or no deal,” Tony interrupted. “If you want me to work on Spangles, then that’s my final offer. If not, good luck finding anyone who could not only find, but decode Howard’s work.”

A silence passed over the two men, each of them staring each other down. Like always, Tony was not the first one to back down.

“I’ll have someone brought in this week,” Pierce agreed.

“Good,” Tony smiled. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got work to do.”

Tony got up from the chair, gave Pierce one last sarcastic wink and left the room. Pierce smiled to himself as he watched him leave. That had gone much better than he thought it would.

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Clint’s brows were furrowed and nostrils flaring. His eyes were cold and unforgiving as they stared forward in determination. Natasha knew this expression. This was the look of the Hawkeye, concentrating on his target, waiting for the final kill. His foe this time, though, was no ordinary opponent. Throughout the duration of their battle, Loki’s eyes had been predatory, the smile on his lips a dangerous one, like a cat toying with its mouse prey. As their little game wore on, his expression became darker, fiercer and everyone in the room could feel the tension thick in the air. Someone had to stop this before it got too far, before someone could get seriously hurt. No one dared step forward to put an end to the madness, though, each too paralyzed with fear to intervene. Natasha could only watch as each man slowly dug their own grave.

“What’s the matter, Lokes?” Clint asked after the silence stretched on too long. The corner of his
lip turned up into a smirk, so confident he was in his ability to win their little game. “All of that supposed power, and now you’re going to lose to a—what was it you called me—a ‘puny mortal’? You’re weak.”

“Enough!” Loki shouted, rising to his feet and leaning forward. Everyone in the room jumped, and Steve gripped the arm of his chair so hard that his blunt nails broke the leather.

“You are—all of you are—beneath me! I am a god, you dull creature, and I will not be bullied by —”

Loki’s tirade was cut short as Clint used the distraction to make his final move. An agent across the room gasped, Natasha cringed, and Loki stood there in complete shock as Clint struck the worst killing blow any of them could imagine…

He used the blue shell.

Loki could only watch in horror as within seconds, the shell struck Bowser, knocking the kart off of the rainbow road and leaving him to fall down into the endless abyss. All eyes turned to the image of Clint’s Yoshi avatar crossing through the finish line, signaling his win of the race.

As Clint grinned and cheered in victory, Loki’s eyes turned toward him. They were so full of hate that Natasha swore she saw a flash of red in his green irises, but it disappeared as quickly as it had come. When Clint turned his attention to Loki, his smile only grew smug.

“For this, mortal, I will kill you slowly—intimately—in all the ways I know you fear.”

“Promises, promises, you pansy. Pull your panties out of your ass and take the loss like a man.”

Every agent in the room flinched, certain that Barton had a death wish. Luckily for them, Captain America came to their rescue. He jumped up, put his hand on Loki’s shoulder and told him to relax. A moment passed before Loki visibly calmed and nodded to Clint.

“You have won this round, Barton, but do not believe that this war is done. I will have my vengeance.”

“So you say,” Clint laughed. “Let me break out Mario Party and we’ll—”

“NO!” Everyone in the room shouted at once.

It had seemed like a fun idea at first, to have a Mario Kart tournament. A great way to kill some time and give their guests a bit of relaxation time, and a great way for Natasha to get a better read on Loki and Steve with their guards down. What had started out as simple fun, though, quickly deteriorated into all out madness. No one had expected Loki and Steve to pick up on the game as quickly as they did, but they learned quickly. Steve made it to sixth place before he was knocked out of the tournament. Natasha came up at a respectable third place, but Loki had been determined to win at all costs. Clint, however, liked to stir the pot, consequences be damned.

Perhaps that was why she and he worked so well together. Barton was good at controlling a situation while Natasha was able to observe and evaluate. What she learned from this particular session was that Loki was adept with learning new technology, and—when determined—he most certainly did not like to lose. Good information to have.

Once the initial tension began to fade from the room, so did many of the agents who had either participated or come to watch the tournament. The excitement was over for now, so they went back to being the world’s security force. Hopefully they hadn’t missed the military coup in Latvaria.
That would be embarrassing.

Loki still looked tense on the couch and Clint was still grinning. Natasha would suggest a row with Loki in the training room, but she didn’t feel that giving the man a weapon would be the best way for him to work through his annoyance at the moment. Instead, she went to the television and flipped to a movie. Whenever they’ve had the downtime, she had begun showing Steve and Loki various movies and television shows in order for Steve to catch up on the times. Loki seemed to enjoy them as well, claiming that there was very little similar entertainment on Asgard. Apparently, the greatest ways to pass time there were drinking, fighting and fucking, all of which Loki didn’t have much freedom to do.

“Ok, boys, what will it be tonight?” She asked as she began searching through their movie options. “Lord of the Rings!” Clint shouted.

“Not again, Barton,” she said.

“What?” He shrugged.

“You’ve said that every time, and it’s not going to happen. I have neither the patience nor the energy to make it through that movie.”

“Such a plebeian,” he said with a roll of his eyes.

“Read the book some time, Barton, and then maybe I’ll start taking you seriously,” she replied. “Steve, Loki, any suggestions?”

“I don’t suppose you’ve got Citizen Kane in there, do you?” Steve asked. “It was a movie from my time and—”

“I know,” she interrupted. “It’s pretty popular, we’ve got it.”

Natasha fought back a smile when Steve’s eyes lit up slightly and a small smile began to play at his lips. Even after all of the time he’s spent around her and others, it still seemed to amaze him that things from his past life had managed to survive seventy years later. Some things just seem to transcend time.

Steve moved himself to the couch to sit between Clint and Loki. Once comfortable, he looked to Loki and started to speak.

“You’ll like this one,” he said. “I saw it when I was on leave in London in ’42.”

Natasha smiled to herself as she heard Steve begin to tell Loki about his first time in a London theater during his time in the war. It was nice seeing him relaxed like this, and, as much as she didn’t like it, she could admit that being the self-appointed babysitter for Loki was having at least some good effect on him. He was talking more, interacting with other agents, and even drawing in his spare time. While she still felt that his dependence on Loki was unhealthy—especially considering the fact that Loki’s motives were still not clear—she felt that he was making a little progress. He was becoming quite friendly with Clint, and she herself was becoming fond of him.

There was one in particular, though, who did not seem to share the sentiment. And like clockwork, as soon as she started the movie and got herself comfortable on her chair, the door to the room opened and in walked the one person she didn’t care to see at the moment.

“So this is where all of the excitement is,” Stark said as he leaned against the doorway.
“Stark,” Clint nodded his head to him in greeting. “What are you doing here, man? I thought Pierce had you locked up in the lab.”

“I chewed through my chains when I heard there was a Mario Kart party going on,” he said. His smug smile faltered slightly when he took a look around the room and saw that the game console had been put away.

“But it looks like SHIELD got their information wrong, again. What’s going on in here?”

“Movie night,” Natasha answered. She didn’t extend an invitation to him, but Stark took her words as one.

Despite the amount of open seats in the room, Stark decided to sit on the couch with the three other men. More specifically, he squeezed himself into the tight space between Steve and Loki, pushing both men out of the way. He threw his arms over the back of the seat and spread his legs open like a whore as he made himself more comfortable, ignoring the incredulous looks from Steve.

“So what are we watching?”

“We were trying to watch Citizen Kane,” Steve said pointedly.

“Boring.”

“You don’t have to stay.”

“Aw, you don’t want me here, Cap?” Stark pouted.

“Oh, for Norns’ sake,” Loki groaned and rolled his eyes.

From what both Loki and Steve have told her, this kind of interaction between Stark and Steve has been going on for weeks. She didn’t know if the hostility stemmed from territory or just good ol’ sexual tension, but everyone was getting sick of it at this point. It was annoying, and—more importantly—it wasn’t good for Steve.

“Stark,” Natasha said, “either shut up and watch the movie, or leave. Those are the only options.”

“Why is everyone here so hostile?” No one responded. “Whatever. I actually came on official business. Mork,” he turned to Loki, “I’ve got good news for you. Want to step out with me?”

“Why can’t you say it here?” Steve asked.

“Sorry, I’m under strict doctor/patient confidentiality.”

“You’re not a doctor.”

“I’ve got seven doctorates. Granted none of them are for medicine, but that’s still seven more than you,” he grinned. “So, Lokes, if you don’t mind.”

Tony moved to get off the couch, but not before moving his hand towards Steve’s hair. A second later, Steve’s head went back a fraction and he gave a quick gasp of pain.

“What the hell?”

“Sorry, thought I saw a fuzz. Must have just been dandruff. You should really take better care of yourself.”
Stark gave Loki a nod and gestured to the doorway before finally getting up and leaving. Steve watched him go, rubbing the back of his head. After a moment, Natasha watched as Loki got up to follow him.

“Do you want us to wait?” She asked.

“That’s alright,” he shook his head. “I won’t be long.”

When he walked to the door, Steve looked like he was about to follow, but Natasha told him to wait. It wouldn’t do any good for either him or Loki if Steve got into another fight with Stark. Besides, she didn’t like seeing him following Loki around like a lost puppy. It gave her a bad feeling.

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Loki dutifully followed Tony back to the lab, neither man exchanging as much as a glance at each other along the way. Tony made it a point to hum to himself and nod wink at every female agent he passed by. Loki ignored it in favor of the fact that the smiles or eye-rolls Tony gained kept the focus off of himself. The people at this base seemed to watch him more closely than the ones in D.C. He felt that was Coulson’s doing at first, but the thought went away after a few days. The older agent seemed content to ignore him, though, and leave the task of watching him to Romanoff and Barton. Still, Loki felt eyes on him everywhere he went in this building. It unnerved him. He’d had enough of being under someone’s constant eye for a hundred lifetimes. He didn’t appreciate it here.

Once in the lab, Tony made sure to lock the door before he turned back to Loki with an excited grin.

“Ok, we’re finally alone. Do the thing.”
Loki sighed and rolled his eyes, but conjured his seidr anyway. “You take advantage, mortal.”

“Don’t act like you don’t like showing off,” he scoffed. “Now come on!”

Loki rolled his eyes and within moments, the green mist of his seidr filled the room. “There. We are alone. What is it that you wish to tell me?”

“Well, I have good news, great news, and bad news. Which would you like to hear first?”

“Start with the bad?”

“No, it wouldn’t make sense with what I have to say,” Tony shook his head. “Ok, good news first then; your ass look amazing in those pants.”

“How is this fact good news?”

“It’s good news for me. Anyway, great news; I talked to Pierce and he’s going to bring someone in to look at your weird head thing.”

“Really?” At this news, Loki perked up. They had been testing his magic and looking at the scans of his brain, looking over those lesions over and over again, but without any real progress. While the whole situation was getting repetitive and Loki could just leave at any time—he did have business to attend to, after all—he felt that SHIELD and Stark were, unfortunately, his only means of removing Odin’s curse.
“So what is the bad news?”

“Bad news is that Pierce isn’t giving me anything for free. In return for helping you, I’ve got to do a little side-project for him.”

“So do it and be done with it.”

“Not as easy as it sounds. There’s a lot of stuff JARVIS is going to have to look through in my personal files, and being stuck here is like being caught inside Windows ’98. I’m not going to get anything done quickly… Why? You got somewhere to be?”

“I’d rather not have to keep jumping through your people’s hoops until I reach my next centennial,” Loki sighed. “So what will it take to make your work go faster?”

“Well,” Tony rubbed the back of his neck, “being around my own tech in my shop would definitely help move things along. After that—”

“Where is your shop?” Loki interrupted.

“In my tower, but—”

“Where is your tower?”

“It’s in Upper Manhattan, but—”


“Um… Ok.”

Tony gave him a strange look but did as he was told and visualized his shop as he’d last left it. The latest schematics of the Iron Man suit on display on screen, Dum-E whirling about in the background, and the biting smell of metal scraps that were scattered about his floor. Tony could almost smell the metal of his shop when Loki’s hands shot out and grabbed both sides of his head. Seconds later, they were engulfed in a green light.

***

Tony’s heart was racing when he opened his eyes and found himself standing in the middle of his workshop. Chest heaving, he blinked a few times, trying to determine if he was just imagining his surroundings or not. What the hell had just happened? He’d gone from being locked up in a SHIELD base to suddenly standing in his home, surrounded by his various projects, and Dum-E chirping with excitement at the sight of his creator.

“Welcome home, Master Stark,” JARVIS’ voice called to him. Tony and Loki both whipped their heads to see wherer the voice had come from.

“What…what the flying fuck?” Tony said once he got his bearings.

“Is this not your shop?” Loki asked calmly. “If it is the wrong place, you have only yourself to blame. I was merely following your directions.”

“No, this is it, it’s just… what the fuck?” He asked again, running a hand through his hair. “How the hell did we get here?”

“Seidr, Stark. You should know this by now.”
“Teleportation…I just fucking teleported. JARV’,” he called. “Did you get that on tape?”

“Your arrival with the unidentified person was captured, sir.”

“Hell yes! JARVIS, save the recording in the private archives and make it top priority. Record all energy levels and break down each frame. First person ever to fucking teleport! Next time give me a heads up so I can ask Scotty to beam us up.”

Tony ran to his computer like an excited child, grinning from ear to ear. His mind was already overflowing with the possibilities of breaking down Loki’s spell into quantum physics that he could understand, instead of that hocus pocus crap. If he could find some way to harness it, he could have a patent within two years… He could swear that he could feel the shiver of a thousand Trekkies run through him in that moment. In an effort to calm himself down, he reached below his desk to the stash he had hidden beneath his computer. It had been weeks since he had a proper drink, so he threw the Scotch back and drank greedily, reveling in the burn of the alcohol.

“What are you doing, Stark?”

“Son of a bitch, call me Tony!” He called over his shoulder.

“I didn’t bring you here to mess around, Tony. Or for you to drink yourself into a stupor. Do what you needed for Pierce and be done with it.”

“Yeah, princess, that’s not how this works,” Tony said, turning around slowly in his chair. “It’s going to take more than a day for what I need to do for Pierce.”

“You know that with just a snap of my fingers, you could find yourself in the deepest level of Midgard’s ocean?”

“Hey,” he raised his hands, “relax. If you don’t believe me, watch this. JARVIS?”

“Yes?”

“How many files are there on Project Rebirth?”

“Well over a thousand, sir.”

“And how many of those have not been edited by Howard?”

“Three hundred and twenty-eight.”

“Go through everything you can find, from start to finish. Isolate blood and DNA samples, and highlight Howard’s most important notes from the day the experiment went down. Create a simulation from archived footage and factor in all variables. How long is that going to take?”

“It will take some time, sir, to break through the security protocols your father put in place and recover all blacklisted materials. My best guess is that everything will be ready in five hours.”

“Thanks, JARV. Daddy loves you, baby.”

“It is nice to have you home as well, sir.”

“And that’s just for the notes I need,” he said, addressing Loki. “The sweaty work is going to take even longer.”

Loki was obviously not pleased with his answer. The prince’s eyes narrowed to a deathly glare that
sent a shiver down Tony’s spine. Tony watched, amused, as he threw a small hissy fit, growling lowly and knocking a couple of things off of Tony’s work bench. Nothing important, thankfully, otherwise the brat would have found himself on the receiving end of a repulsor blast.

“So what am I expected to do until then?” Loki snapped.

Tony shrugged. “Are you still up for a movie night?”

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Five hours later and Loki was still no closer to getting out from under these mortals’ thumbs than when he’d first arrived on this accursed realm. Loki believed himself to be a patient person. One does not plan against the mightiest realm in Yggdrasil for centuries without learning that particular virtue, but he was beginning to get fed up with these lower creatures. He had done all that they asked for them, shown them every cooperation that they had asked for and submitted to all of their experimentations like some kind of rat, and where has it gotten him so far? Watching a film about a cartoon girl with long, magical hair hit a man in the face with a frying pan… How the heavens themselves do tremble.

Of course, Loki could save himself all of this trouble and continue on with his search for the Tesseract, leave the mortals behind and just be done with it all. However, every time the thought crossed his mind, he couldn’t bring himself to do it. The promise of removing Odin’s curse and walking in his true skin was just too great of a temptation for him to walk away from. It had been so long—since that night with Hermes by the waters—that he last saw the azure color of his flesh and the lines of his heritage, but he could still remember the feeling of it. The sense of happiness, comfort and completeness that he had never felt before in all of his years in Asgard. He would give anything to feel that way again.

Besides, Loki would be lying to himself if he said that he wouldn’t miss at least a few of his mortal pets. Steve was a loyal companion, and Natasha, though he didn’t trust her, made for a wonderful sparring partner. Even Stark and his endless ramblings was endearing in comparison to the boisterous boastings of Thor and his Warriors Four…He could probably do without the one who calls himself Hawk, though. That man just gets under his skin. Throwing the blue shell as a last attempt to thwart Loki’s victory. The man had no honor.

As the film onscreen continued on with the Rapunzel girl singing her healing incantation to restore a wounded Flynn, Loki couldn’t help but laugh. This girl was an amateur if it took this much power for her to heal something as superficial as a cut. Loki could do something like that with a flick of his wrist.

“What’s so funny?” Tony asked. When he turned to look at him, Loki gave another laugh. Which Tony used as an excuse to scoot closer to him on the sofa. “What?”

“I just find it funny, is all, how you mortals have come so far from fearing anything that might be considered magical or different, to entertaining your children with brightly colored witches that sing and dance.”

“It’s human nature to fear what you don’t understand,” he shrugged. “Can’t blame them for not knowing. And Rapunzel isn’t a witch. She is a kidnapped princess who was born with magical hair. The witch is her adopted mom. Get it right.”

“The girl casts a spell—a rather useless one—and it shapes the nature of reality around her to her will. She is a witch. And I feel as though I should take offense to the many Midgardian films I’ve been forced to sit through that portray seidmann and seidkonnurs as horrid villains to be trampled
down by ungifted peasants. That Maleficent creature especially.”

“You are totally not going to defend Maleficent to me right now. Her name means diabolical.”

“She did not choose her name,” Loki said. He turned towards Tony, ready to give off his rant. The other man scooted closer, pulling one knee up onto the couch and throwing his arm over the back.

“There was never a reason given for the kingdom to fear her, so there was no reason for the king and queen to publicly deny her an invitation to their daughter’s christening—”

“She was an evil fairy.”

“How so?” Loki countered. “Had she burned any villages? Did she poison the water supply? The monarchy was still standing and the kingdom seemed to be prospering, so how exactly was she evil?”

That made Tony pause for a second. “Well, who the hell just curses a baby?”

Loki visibly cringed. “A person with no honor, but that was not who she was. She gave the child the gift of beauty and grace, and then predicted her future.”

“She said that the kid would prick her finger and die when she turned sixteen!”

“That seemed to be more of a warning,” Loki shrugged. “It was the supposedly good fairy who used the magic to turn the prediction into a curse. Were Maleficent truly evil, she could have easily stolen the soul of the child from her crib or even broken her neck while her parents hid her away. No, she was not evil until the circumstances dictated it. We know nothing of her life before the child’s christening. She could have possibly used her magic to help and heal those whom she deemed worthy, and protected her own realm. It was because she was different that she was feared. Their own prejudice and fear is what turned her into what she became.”

“…I’m starting to think you just watched the Angelina Jolie movie.”

“I haven’t the faintest idea who that is. My point is, had the king and queen not publicly shunned Maleficent simply because she was an intimidating seidr wielder, they would have maintained a truce and received bountiful gifts for their daughter. It was their own prejudice that put their child at risk.”

“Remind me to smoke a joint with you sometime,” Tony laughed. “If you’re this passionate about something this mundane sober, then I can’t imagine you high.”

“The plight of fellow seidr wielders is no mundane matter, Stark,” Loki smiled. Tony growled a little at the name and Loki laughed. “Yes, yes, call you Tony. I know.”

“Pretty but dumb. Why does that always seem to be my type,” Tony sighed. He sipped more of the Scotch in his tumbler while his arm over the couch seemed to move of its own accord. His hand came up and absently played with the loose strands of Loki’s long hair, rolling them between his fingers.

“I’m not sure whether that was meant to be a compliment or an insult, but it is not appreciated either way,” Loki said. His eyes looked pointedly to where Stark was playing with his hair. The other man didn’t seem to notice, or he just didn’t care. His smirk slowly turned to a grin and he scooted closer to Loki, his knee bumping the other.

“What, you don’t like being called pretty?” He asked. “You didn’t seem to mind it before.”
“Please,” Loki rolled his eyes. “I have been called such and more before.”

“Psh… Conceited.”

“Says the man who must plaster his name on a tower that touches the sky. What I don’t appreciate is the fact that you seem to always have this in your system whenever you say it,” Loki said, reaching out to take the alcohol from Tony’s hand and put it on the table in front of them.

“Hey, you were pretty before I started drinking. That just helps make it easier to say.” He grinned again, turning on the Stark charm that typically had people eating out of the palm of his hand.

Loki, though, rolled his eyes again and moved back away from him. Tony frowned at the new development of the scowl on Loki’s face. The mood changed suddenly, going from a carefree drunken flirting to being able to actually the storm clouds forming over Loki’s head.

“It’s a pity to know that no matter what realm you run to, all men seem to remain the same.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Aesir, Midgardian; you men imbibe your drink and you feel as though you’re not responsible for your actions afterwards.”

Loki’s mind soon filled with memories of every feast, celebration and festival that he had been forced to attend. All of the careless and cruel words that Thor would spew once he’d had a tankard of ale in his system. The lewd looks he received from tipsy men sitting at the high table, the caress of Fandral’s foot against his under the table one particular night, and all of the nights that he was forced to be escorted back to his rooms by Thor once the celebrations had died down. Being pinned against a wall; a hand gripping at his side while another pawed at his chest; his chaperones—or worse, Hulda—averting their eyes and pretending not to see what was happening or hear his pleas to make it stop. All of those moments, all of those indignities, excused away by the bewitching effects of a simple drink. He was tired of hearing that excuse no matter where he went.

“Ah…,” Tony searched his mind for something clever to say to break the sudden tension, but for once in his life, he was coming up blank. “Jeez…look, I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable. Pepper always said I was good at that…I thought it was a compliment at first,” he laughed awkwardly. “I’m sorry, though. Is there anything I can do to make us even, or…?”

“…Your apology is accepted, Tony,” Loki said. “As for what you can do for me, make your invisible servant complete your task so that SHIELD can remove this curse from me.”

Tony had to laugh at that. “Hey JARV,” he called to the ceiling. “How much longer until the simulation is ready?”

“I have finished piecing together what I could find on your father’s work on Project Rebirth and am currently running through all possible variables. It should take another two hours to complete.”

“Thank you, JARVIS.”

“You’re welcome, sir.”

“Sorry, Reindeer Games. I can’t make time go faster.”

“Give me access to Kvasir’s library and two months and I could find a way,” Loki grumbled. Tony laughed.
“Alright, I get it, you can do magic tricks. It’s getting old now.”

“Says the man who gushes whenever I change my appearance.”

“You had cat ears and a tail!” Tony exclaimed, brown eyes going wide. “Do you have any idea what that looked like? Jesus, all I would have to do is put a skirt on you and sold you to a Japanese businessman and I could have the funding for twelve new suits.”

“…There is a compliment in there somewhere, I’m sure.”

“Don’t over think it there, Loki-chan. Next time you do it, though, call me senpai.”

“…You are the strangest mortal I’ve ever met.”

“But I’m a babe, and I think you kind of like it,” Tony said. He leaned in and smiled again.

He expected Loki to roll his eyes or call him an idiot, but he didn’t. Tony watched, bemused as Loki tried his best to fight off a tiny smile and moved his bright green eyes away. Tony couldn’t help but grin.

Loki crossed his arms over his chest and turned his attention back to the film. He didn’t like the fact that he was getting so familiar with these creatures, let alone the one who seemed to possess the arrogance of Thor. No, that was perhaps too harsh. Sure, Stark had an over-inflated ego, but were it the size of Thor’s, there would be no room for Loki to stand anywhere near him. While he may have Hermes’ humor—and libido, if the rumors were true—his old friend was more of a carefree nature than the mortal. Stark was… Stark was something different, something that he’d never experienced before. He didn’t know whether that was good or not.

The movie went on without any more interruptions. Loki even found himself laughing and slightly admiring the princess’ spunk. Then a new scene appeared with the princess boarding a small boat with her peasant. He watched as the king and queen of the fairytale kingdom, with a look of heartbreak in their eyes, lit a single paper lantern and released it into the air. Soon the screen was filled with countless more lights. More music played as the princess watched with awe as the lanterns rose into the air, filling the night sky and rivaling the stars. Loki was taken back by the beauty of it all. All the lights gently rising into the air, surrounding the girl, but never knowing that it was the act of two heartbroken parents, calling out to their lost child.

Loki suddenly found himself thinking of Laufey.

Did his mother mourn this way after the loss of his children? Did he and the people of Jotunheim gather together to comfort each other and turn their pain into beauty? Did they call out for their lost prince to come home? Loki thought about the ice and snow of Jotunheim and wondered how it would look reflected by millions of tiny lights underneath the blue nebula surrounding the realm. All of the shades of blue, purple and green… It sounded like a dream.

“Hey,” Stark said. “You ok?”

Loki was confused until he felt the wetness on his cheek. He hastily wiped it away and turned from Tony.

“Sentiment,” he said by way of explanation.

“I get it,” Tony said. “Disney does that to you. Don’t ever watch Up. You’ll be bawling like a baby in the first ten minutes.”
Loki laughed, hoping that it would diffuse the tension. It worked and Stark didn’t say anything more.

The song still played on the film and now the princess and her peasant were singing together. They were holding hands and singing about seeing the light. In the back of his mind, Loki couldn’t help but wonder how, if the situation were real, how the two would know the words to sing, but he kept the thought to himself. Barton had informed him before that he needed to work on suspending his disbelief in order to enjoy these films. Something happened, though.

As the peasant raised a hand to brush the princess’ hair out of her face, Stark’s arm slowly came around his shoulder again. Instead of playing it casually like he had before, though, Tony’s hand intentionally rested on his arm. Loki had to force himself to relax as he felt Tony gently pull him closer. Tony’s body was warm as he rested against him. Loki thought that he saw a tiny blue light from the corner of his eye, but elected to ignore it when Tony’s fingers started trailing up and down his arms, lightly and soothingly. He had to admit that this felt nice at the very least. It was relaxing, soothing, and almost intimate.

_This isn’t why you’re here_, he had to remind himself when he felt himself wanting to return the embrace.

_Stark may be something you haven’t encountered before, but he wants what they all want. The second you give up the control, you’ll never get it back._

Loki steeled himself to give Tony another scathing look. When he looked up, though, he found that Tony was watching him. Brown, slightly glassy eyes were looking down on him with something akin to fondness. A slight smile was playing at his lips, bringing out the lines around his mouth and at the corners of his eyes. He had grown into quite a handsome man since the first time he and Loki met, and his eyes were dark and warm.

_Well…it wouldn’t hurt to secure a few more allies. Especially one with this much power and influence in the realm. If nothing else, his power could be your power._

It took all of two minutes to weigh the options before Loki smiled coyly and batted his eyes in an alluring manner. Stark took the hint and leaned down towards him. Their lips were nearly touching and Stark was already closing his eyes in anticipation of the kiss, when a voice was suddenly heard overhead.

“Sir?”

Tony’s eyes squeezed shut in annoyance and he threw his head back. “You’re killing me here, JARVIS.”

“I like your invisible servant,” Loki smiled.

“You’re a dick. What’s up, buddy?” He called to the ceiling.

“I have received information from SHIELD that both of your absences have been noticed. Pierce has contacted Director Fury who in turn informed him that you would likely return here. Agent Coulson has dispatched a team to retrieve you.”

“Shit!” Tony jumped off the couch and looked at Loki. “What the hell happened to your spell!?”

“I told you that it requires a lot of energy. It holds at a maximum of two hours.” Loki shrugged, not
quite sure why the man was getting so upset.

“Shit!! Wait a minute, we’ve been gone longer than that. Why the hell did they take so long?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I believe I may have found the answer as to why.”

“What do you mean?”

Before JARVIS could answer, the lights and all devices shut down. Loki jumped and looked around, though he didn’t know what he was expecting to find.


“JARVIS isn’t here, Stark.”

Natasha’s voice was cold coming through the sound system in the room. Loki could actually see the point where Tony’s blood began to run cold. His back stiffened and shoulders tensed.

“What the hell, Romanoff? You asked for this, Stark.”

There was a sigh of disappointment, and then suddenly the room was engulfed in a blinding light.

Both Loki and Tony had to cover their eyes from being blinded. Squinting through his fingers, though, Loki found the source of the light coming from outside. Hovering outside the tower near the helipad was the Quinjet, and it was shining its search lights directly into the tower. From the motions of the lights, it seemed that the jet was making a landing. It obviously wasn’t going fast enough for one of the jet’s occupants. He could vaguely make out a humanoid silhouette jumping out of the craft before it could land, and it began to approach rather quickly.

“How thick is that glass?” Loki asked.

“What?”

“The glass, how thick is it?” he repeated. The thing outside was running at incredible speed.

“It’s bulletproof. Why?”

The shattering sound glass was all the answer he needed. Loki watched as Tony ran towards the bar set up across the room. He thought at first that perhaps the man was hiding, but what he didn’t realize was that Tony had stashed gauntlet prototypes all over the tower. Pepper called it hoarding, but Tony just called it being prepared. He put it on quickly and felt relieved at the hum of the repulsor powering on. JARVIS may be down, but as long as the arc reactor was in place, he at least had a safety net.

Loki looked back to where the silhouette was marching into the house. Outside, the jet was finally making its landing. With the lights stilled, details of the person started to come more into focus. A person with a large shoulder width was walking closer, hands at their sides balled up into fists. The
lights outside began to dim and Loki could make out a dark blue jumpsuit with a star across the chest.

“Stark!”

Captain?

Across the room, Tony had his arm raised. His gauntlet ready to fire.

“Shit, is that you Spangles?” He called out. “Almost gave me a fucking heart attack. You’re paying for that glass, by the way.”

Steve didn’t answer. Loki watched as the captain’s shoulders went forward and he walked towards Stark. Loki recognized the look he was wearing. It was one he had often seen on Thor whenever he managed to anger the other prince. It did not bode well for Tony.

“Captain,” Loki called to get his attention. Much like that day in the training room, however, Steve didn’t seem to even hear him, let alone notice that he was in the room.

“You know, there is a law against breaking and entering,” Stark said, backing up slightly at the quickly approaching Rogers. “Fun thing about that law, I can legally shoot you now.”

He fired a warning shot from the gauntlet that went over Steve’s shoulder and through the wall on the other side of the room. The soldier did not slow his stride for a moment. Stark was ready to fire again, but before he could, Rogers was on him. One solid punch to his face was enough to knock him out cold onto the floor.

For a moment, Loki thought the situation funny. The moment passed quickly, though, when he saw a small trickle of blood on the floor next to Tony’s head. Loki jumped off of the sofa and ran to the two men. Steve was still hovering over the other man, looking almost as if he were going to keep attacking, when Loki pushed him out of the way. Steve didn’t do or say anything, which Loki took as a small comfort as he cradled Tony’s head in his hands. He could feel blood on his fingertips and a gash in Tony’s head. His eyes glanced up and saw the cause of the wound. The punch had knocked him out, but he had hit his head on the corner of the bar on the way down. A concussion he could likely survive, but the wound was not good.

He closed his eyes and tried to push his worry to the back of his mind. In his early days of seidr training, Freyja thought it necessary that he should learn some of the healing spells. At first, Loki had bristled at the idea of being taught any of the healing arts, for such a thing was a womanly task and Loki did not want to adhere to what the Aesir thought of him any more than he already did. When she sprained his wrist in their sparring session, though, she let him remain in pain for a full day to let him learn his lesson. Loki was thankful for that now.

Loki closed his eyes and chanted the minor spell that he knew. His power in healing was nowhere close to Eir; he was not capable of curing any long term illnesses or saving a person on the brink of death, but he knew he could heal injuries and battle wounds. When he felt his seidr slipping into Tony’s body, he could feel it searching through the man, seeking out injury. It was found quickly and, just as he suspected, there was a gash in Tony’s head. Not enough to kill him, but enough to cause some damage if left to bleed. His magic worked quickly stitching the skin back together. He’ll have a concussion and a hell of a headache later, but he would be alright.

The seidr lingered in his body, seeking out any other damage Steve may have caused. Tony’s nose was fractured, but it was quick to fix and should not damage his face in any way. It went deeper, traveling through the mortal’s veins and searched out what it could. There was some significant
damage to Tony’s liver and minor scarring in his lungs, but it was healing and there wasn’t much Loki could do for that. Something else gave him pause, though. He could feel his magic working towards Tony’s heart and tasted something on the tip of his tong. It was the taste of something sharp. Something like steel, rust, and—oddly enough—a hint of coconut. Unless the books of Kvasir’s library were utterly wrong, as they were concerning the Jotun species, then a Midgardian’s anatomy should not contain this particular flavor.

Curious, he peeked his eyes open and was rightfully surprised to see a glowing light coming from Tony’s chest. It was a soft, white-blue light shining beneath the dark fabric of Tony’s shirt. Loki had seen flashes of the light before, but he had paid no mind to it. Now that it was there staring him in the face, Loki wondered why the hell he had let such a thing slip by his notice. What was this light? Where was it coming from? It seemed as if it was connected to Tony himself, but that shouldn’t be possible. The mortal possessed no seidr, well, none that Loki could find in him anyway. He influenced his magic to center towards the light coming from Tony, but as he did, he felt the taste in his mouth grow stronger and the light became more intense, humming as it grew brighter.

His heart. The light was coming from his heart…Fascinating.

“Knock, knock! Anybody home!”

Loki pulled his seidr back at the sound of Barton’s voice. Tony would be fine for now. He just needs to rest, and in all honesty this misunderstanding would likely go much smoother if he didn’t speak.

He looked up to Steve, who—throughout this whole duration—had been staring down at Loki with glazed, unfocused eyes. Whether he had been watching what Loki was doing or his mind was gone far away, he did not know. He was just glad that the soldier had not interrupted. At the sound of Barton’s voice, though, he seemed to snap out of whatever daze he was lost in and, slowly, came back into the present.

“Over here, Agent Barton,” Steve called. “Stark and Loki are here.”

“Oh, thank God for that. For a moment I thought that we broke into the wrong tower.”

Putting Tony’s head down carefully on the floor, Loki stood to see Barton walking casually into the main room, stepping over the broken glass and looking around curiously. He was dressed in his SHIELD uniform, but his bow and quiver were slung over his back. Unlike Steve, he obviously did not perceive any threat. When he spotted Loki, he was practically grinning.

“You’re in trouble,” he sing-songed.

“Is that so?” Loki raised a brow. “I was under the impression that I was a guest of SHIELD, not its prisoner.”

“Yeah, but Tasha isn’t really a fan of hide-and-seek. Ain’t that right, babe?”

When Barton looked over his shoulder, Steve and Loki’s eyes followed. There the fiery redhead stood against the light of the Quinjet and—oh. Oh dear…She did indeed look angry.

***

Natasha wasn’t angry—she swore she wasn’t. No, angry wasn’t the right word for what she was feeling. Annoyed would be closer, but it didn’t quite capture the full extent of it. Irritated? Vexed? Exasperated? No… none of those seemed right. This stupid fucking language. It had so many
words—most meaning the exact same thing—but none of them could sum it up perfectly. Some days she really missed being able to speak—to think—in her own language. But that part of herself is gone now, like it never even existed. Such a shame. The thought of that in return gave her a sense of...toska.

The reason for her current displeasure, though, was that for the past five hours, she had been playing babysitter for an emotional traumatized super-soldier, who was acting as if he was going through withdrawals. At first it seemed good for Steve to get him a little bit of space from Loki. He had been concerned at first—looking over his shoulder every few seconds, waiting for the other to come back—but after thirty minutes of *Citizen Kane*, Natasha saw that he let himself relax and become engrossed in the movie.

It was only when the movie ended that he remembered that Loki hadn’t returned from his talk with Stark. Natasha wanted to allow Loki some space, tried to distract him with another film, but Steve was adamant—his hands balled and trembling, his shoulders straight and tense. He was a soldier—a captain—who needed to know that his command was safe and accounted for. He needed that little bit of control over the situation, and she knew she had to relent it to him, or possibly lose control of the situation with him.

When they got to the lab, though, it was empty. Loki and Stark weren’t there. Nor were they in their rooms, the cafeteria, the shooting range, the gym, or the training room. With each place they checked, Steve had become more and more nervous, to the point where sweat had formed on his brow and his hands were downright shaking. Natasha took him with her to check the monitors while Clint sent out an alert to some of the more discreet agents on the base.

The monitors didn’t show anything strange at first. Stark took Loki to the lab, looking a little too excited, then Loki made some kind of hand gesture. The rest of the footage just showed the two of them talking with neutral expressions on their faces. Nothing out of the ordinary, however she was suspicious as to the lack of activity. All of the basic tests and scans on Loki were already done by Banner and Stark in the first few days, and if he were testing Loki’s magic again, Stark would have seemed more animated. An hour and a half into the footage, though, something strange happened.

Loki and Stark were on the screen on minute, and the next their bodies flickered and disappeared completely. They didn’t walk off-screen and there was nothing wrong with the footage itself. Both men just seemed to disappear. She rewound the tape several times to watch the disappearing act again, and the fourth time she noticed something. Neither men cast a shadow. She paused the tape when it began to flicker and then she saw it; Loki and Stark’s bodies became transparent, like a hologram. To be sure, she compared the tape with the secondary infrared camera. Just as she thought, a few minutes after Loki and Stark entered the lab, their heat signatures vanished.

The next few hours were spent confirming the situation with Coulson and having a complete sweep of the base. Once it was clear that they were gone, Coulson gave the order to track them down, with extreme prejudice if necessary. She would never fully understand his and Stark’s hostile relationship, but she wasn’t one to ask questions, and Steve was more than happy to follow orders.

The next few hours was spent narrowing down their location, hacking into the JARVIS system—never let it be said that is an easy job—and getting the proper permits to fly the Quinjet through civilian air zones. Bureaucracy always slowed up the process, but Coulson assured her that it was necessary, lest they cause a city-wide panic. No matter to her, she supposed. Results were results, and at the moment, their recovery mission appeared to have been successful.

She looked through the windshield of the craft and saw Steve standing over Loki. The prince was
kneeling on the ground for some reason, though she wasn’t concerned. While Rogers was worried and close to a panic attack earlier, he seemed calmer on the ride over. Quiet, but calm. He wasn’t likely to snap soon, but she would still need to watch out.

“Clint,” she called to her partner.

“Yeah, babe?”

She chose—for his sake—to ignore the name. “Go make sure that Rogers doesn’t kill Stark.”

“Why is that becoming a recurring order from you?”

“I don’t make the rules, I just enforce them.”

“If Loki runs, can I give him an arrow to the knee?”

“You’re not playing Skyrim, Clint. Just do your job.”

“Yes, mom,” he groaned, jumping out of the Quinjet.

Natasha chose to hang back for a moment. She needed to make a personal call first. Like a good boss, he answered immediately.

“Agent Romanoff, what is your status?”

“Stark and Loki are in the tower, Barton and Rogers have them now.”

“All done discreetly, I assume.”

“If you can call shutting the power off of the tallest and brightest tower in the New York skyline, and maneuvering a stealth jet past countless buildings discreet, then yes. We were as quiet as a church-mouse.”

“Agent Barton has been teaching you sarcasm, I see.”

“Well, it is important to acclimate with the surroundings,” she sighed. “So do we bring them back in and question them at the base, or get answers first and be home in time for supper?”

“We’ve known that Loki had the power to leave whenever he wanted since he first came in, so questioning how he did it would just be redundant.”

“And you don’t want to learn any of his magic tricks?”

“We already have a guy for that. He’s a bit strange…”

“So bring them in?”

“If it were up to me, I’d say yes.”

“If it were up to you?”

“I’ve gotten an order handed down from Pierce. Stark is threatening to pull all of his contributions—financial and liaisons—unless we continue with Loki on his terms.”

“And Pierce agreed with this?” She asked. “When a child throws a tantrum, you don’t give him the toy he wants. You punish him and send him to his room.”
“Would that we could, but according to Pierce, Stark is already threatening to go to the media. Despite the fact that SHIELD is harboring a potentially hostile alien, the man who destroyed Harlem, and a dead national hero—and who knows how many other secrets he’s hacked by now—, people don’t tend to like the words ‘unlawful imprisonment’ in the same sentence as America’s favorite superhero.”

“…According to Pierce?”

“Yes…according to him.”

“Alright,” she said with a slight nod. “How fast can you have our things brought over?”

“Already on their way.”

“Thank you, Agent Coulson. I’ll update you on our status once we settle in.”

“Looking forward to hearing from you.”

Natasha ended the call and put her com away. Nothing about this was right. It seemed that Coulson had the same feeling. She needed to talk to Fury soon. He’s one of the few men that she had any trust in—however minor it was.

She gave one heavy sigh and got into her zone, putting on her work face. She left the jet, one gun strapped to her waist and another at her ankle, and walked towards the tower. Absently, she thought that the view from up here was stunning, and something that Clint would definitely enjoy, but the thought was lost when she saw the broken glass. Perhaps she should have been a bit more worried about Steve.

Stepping over the broken shards of glass and into the tower, she found all of her idiots gathered together. The main idiot was on the ground, unconscious from the looks of it. Her idiot said something to her, and was looking over his shoulder at her with too much amusement on his face. Steve was standing back off to the side, face neutral and eyes flicking back from her to Loki. While Loki—the idiot cause for all of her stress—looked to her with a mixed expression of confusion, embarrassment, and mild fear. It could almost be genuine.

“Lady Romanoff,” Loki greeted.

“Prince Loki,” she said back. Loki smirked a little at her formality. “Glad to see that you’re alright. You gave everyone quite a scare. Are you in need of any medical assistance?”

“Thank you for your concern, but I am alright. The same cannot be said for him, though,” he said, gesturing to Stark.

“Hmm… What happened to him?”

“He shot at me, I defended myself,” Steve replied. “Loki already fixed up the damage with his seidr.”

“Is that right?” Well, wasn’t he just a treasure trove of wonders.

“I did what I could, but it is only minor. Healing spells are not my specialty.”

“I’ll take a better look at him later. For now, though,” she let herself trail off and pulled a device from her belt. After a few minutes, the lights to the tower came back on, as well as all electric devices. The TC came back on just in time for her to see Eugene cutting Rapunzel’s hair, saving
her from Mother Gothel.

“If you didn’t like the movies at the base, Loki, you could have just said so,” Clint said.

“That would have been terribly rude of me.”

“Systems coming back online.” A voice from overhead spoke. “Miss Romanoff, I wish that I could say that it is a pleasure to see you again, but it would be a lie.”

“Glad to see you haven’t forgotten me, JARVIS.”

“You do leave an impression. My sensors read that Master Stark is unconscious. Does he need medical assistance?”

If she didn’t know any better, it would have sounded like the AI was concerned. Leave it to Stark to traverse through the uncanny valley.

“He has a concussion,” Loki called to the ceiling. “I’ve repaired his broken bones and stitched his head wound, but there is nothing more I can do.”

“Thank you, Mister Laufeyjarson. I will monitor him through the evening until he wakes.”

“Good. JARVIS,” Natasha called, “how many bedrooms are on this floor?”

“Two on this floor, including the master suite. There are four on the level below.”

“Thank you, JARVIS. Captain Rogers, please assist Stark back to his room. Agent Barton, set up in the spare room on this floor.”

“Are we not going back to SHIELD?” Loki asked.

“No,” she answered. “Hope you like this place, Loki. It’s home now.”

Stark was not going to be happy when he woke. But at least his anger would give provide enough distraction for her to do some digging. First things first, she wanted to know why Stark stole strands of Steve’s hair.

***

Dr. Banner looked so tired these days. The man always had a ruffled appearance and dark rings under his eyes, indicating that he had many sleepless nights, but it seemed more apparent to those around him of late. His work on the Tesseract was taking its toll. He was going to crack soon, it was obvious to anyone who could see.

But of course, no one saw. No one was looking at Banner. They didn’t look at the way he rubbed his temples every few minutes; the way his shoulders tensed whenever someone spoke too long to him; nor the way that his eyes changed color when he was close to snapping. As long as Banner was under control, no one could see that he was going to break soon. When his monster snaps, then they will probably notice, but until then, no one would know.

Except for Dmitri.

Dmitri watched, day by day as the good doctor forced himself through whatever pain the Tesseract was causing him. He watched as it took Selvig’s mind, bit by bit, and shaped it into its own personal tool. Selvig was a slave to the Tesseract, fulfilling its desires and soothing its distress, all for the promise of the bright, shining future that it whispered to him. The once brilliant physicist
Dmitri could see it all, what no one else could. He could see everything, because no one was watching him. Why would they, though? He was nothing. Just another mindless face in the crowd, surrounded by strangers who did not care to know his name, let alone look at his face. There were many advantages to being invisible, to blending. Dmitri had learned them all.

“Agent Thompson,” a voice whispered in his ear. “A word, please.”

“Of course, Agent Ward.”

Dmitri left his post at the entrance and followed Ward out. The senior agent led him to a secluded room where Rumlow and the STRIKE team were already there waiting for him. There was a singular table in the room, upon which sat a large bag and a manila folder. Once inside, STRIKE secured the room and Rumlow stood at the door.

“May I ask what is so important that you felt the need to disrupt my work?” He asked.

“The liaison called with an order from Pierce,” Ward said. “You’re being reassigned.”

“The Tesseract is finally ready for Phase 2, Selvig’s brain is almost in shambles and the Hulk will be making an appearance soon. What could possibly be more important that Pierce needs my assistance for?”

“We have a bigger threat to deal with than the Hulk,” Rumlow spoke.

“HYDRA enemy number one has resurfaced, and he has a powerful friend,” Ward continued. “Pierce has already made arrangements to have the threat neutralized, but he’ll need you to take out the ally.”

“…Now that is something worthy of my services,” Dmitri smiled. He walked over to the table and began to look through the bag. “Who am I to be this time?”

“Neurosurgeon with a knowledge of the mystic. Character’s history, accomplishments, abilities, and career achievements are listed in the file, along with a description of your target. You have five hours to study and adapt, after which you’ll be flown to the New York base and picked up by Agent May. You will be delivered to the drop-off point. All of this while under the guise of your new alias. Understood.”

“You act as if this is my first time,” Dmitri laughed.

“We’ll leave you to it then.”

Ward nodded to him and one by one, he and the STRIKE team left him to his work. He opened the file and began to read over his new alias...Strange. Not like anything he had ever attempted before.

However, blending was never a challenge for the Chameleon.

Chapter End Notes

As I said, I am a terrible person and I'm so sorry for taking so long. I feel like I'm writing myself into a corner, but I will not give up on this. (Captain America wouldn't
want me to!)

Anyway, thank you guys for reading. I can't promise to be steady in updates, but they will happen.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!