

Haywire

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/29337519) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/29337519>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Thor (Movies) , Iron Man (Movies) , Marvel Cinematic Universe , The Avengers (Marvel Movies)
Relationships:	Loki/Tony Stark , Loki & Thor (Marvel)
Characters:	Loki (Marvel) , Tony Stark , Thor (Marvel) , Jane Foster (Marvel) , Natasha Romanov (Marvel) , Clint Barton , Steve Rogers
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Sentinels & Guides , Alternate Universe - Soulmates , Sentinel Loki (Marvel) , Guide Tony Stark , First Meetings , Soul Bond , Fluff , Feels , Protective Loki (Marvel) , Possessive Behavior , Scenting , Touch-Starved , Cuddling & Snuggling , Comfort , Empath tony stark , Sensory Overload , Minor Jane Foster/Thor , Thor and Loki are actually brothers , Insecure Tony Stark , Cultural Differences , Happy Ending , First Kiss , Thor is a Good Bro (Marvel) , Good Odin (Marvel)
Language:	English
Collections:	FrostIron* , My Favourites to read , Frostiron (Loki/Tony) , Loki Tony , Best , Tony Stark
Stats:	Published: 2021-02-10 Completed: 2021-10-05 Words: 24,140 Chapters: 3/3

Haywire


by [AMidnightDreary](#)


Summary

When his brother asks him for help, Loki expects their visit to Midgard to be tedious and unpleasant.

He does not expect to finally meet his Guide.

Notes

Thank you to Rabentochter for reading this beforehand, you're the best! 

I might add to this eventually, but I can't say when or if at all  For now, enjoy!

Chapter 1

Thor has, once again, gone completely insane. And possibly braindead. Really, there are only two options: either Loki inherited every ounce of intelligence Frigga and Odin had to offer, or he and Thor are not actually related. Sometimes he thinks that he might prefer the latter.

"No," he says, as firmly as he can, and turns a page of his book. "Absolutely not."

"Brother," Thor says, "I know you don't want to and of course I understand. Believe me, I do, but you might not have a choice. Midgard is in danger."

"Ah, yes. Your precious Midgard." Loki looks up from his book, acting like he just had an epiphany. "But that's just it, isn't it? Contrary to you, I haven't set foot on Midgard in ages and I don't care for it, either, so, yes. *Your* Midgard, and your problem."

Thor crosses his arms and looks at him with a mixture of imploration and stubbornness. "I won't accept a no, Loki. I promised my shield brothers -"

"They aren't your shield brothers, Thor. They are your Midgardian pets."

"- that you would help, and I don't break my promises."

"No? Do you remember that one time you promised you would go to the kitchens and get us both some cake, but proceeded to eat the whole thing yourself?"

"That was five centuries ago."

"Well, I'm a very resentful person."

"But you are also a good man," Thor says and sits down on the bench next to Loki, keeping his distance so as to not make Loki uncomfortable. "And I know that you would never turn your back on me when I need you."

"It takes more than that to manipulate a manipulator, Thor."

"I'm not trying to manipulate you, I'm just speaking the truth."

Loki suppresses a sigh and looks down at his book, frowning. "Thor, I can barely even leave the palace without losing my mind," he says, quietly. "No matter if I want to or not, I wouldn't be of any use in Midgard."

"Jane will come with us," Thor says at once, because apparently he thought things through for a change. "She's been able to help you in the past. And I won't leave your side, either. I'll make sure that nobody crosses any lines, and if you get overwhelmed, I'll protect you. As always."

"As always," Loki agrees, lips twitching into a brief, bitter smile. He's unbelievably tired of needing protection. For the first time, he allows himself to actually consider the idea.

Thoughtfully, he adds, "Returning to Midgard wouldn't be too bad, I suppose. I did like it there."

"See? It will be -"

"But back then there were much less people in Midgard," Loki continues, "and I've never been in a Midgardian city. New York - judging by your stories, the noise alone would kill me."

"Don't be dramatic."

Loki just looks at his brother, unimpressed and unamused, and after a moment Thor gives in and winces slightly.

"It might put you out of action, but only for a few minutes. And like I said, Jane and I will be there. Nothing will happen to you." Thor leans in a little, his eyes big and blue and pleading. "Brother, I really need your help. I will bring you all the cake you could possibly want if you just come with me."

Usually, Loki isn't easily swayed. Sadly, every rule has an exception, and his brother has always been one of Loki's weak spots.

He sighs and closes his book. "I'll take you up on that."

*

The second they arrive in Midgard, Loki knows that he is going to die. Oh, he's definitely going to die right here and now, because just half of everything that's crashing down on him at the moment would already be far too much to deal with. The smells alone - *air rainnotlongago stoneglassmetal foodwhatkindoffood? peoplesomanypeople gasdirtpollution whatanimalsmellslikethat?whatisthatwhatisthatwhatisthat* - are making talking and moving and thinking impossible, and the sheer *noise* of whatever hel is going on in the city below them -

"Loki, it's alright. Can you hear me?"

If anybody touches him right now, he is going to obliterate them. He decides to stop breathing altogether. Oxygen is vastly overrated, especially oxygen that smells like this.

"Do you need to leave? Loki, do you need to leave?"

Loki shakes his head. What he needs is a moment of peace and silence in a *clean and empty room*. Why are they outside? Why aren't they -

"What's wrong with him?"

"Shut up, Clint."

"Is he going to pass out?"

"No, he is not," Thor says. He's standing half in front of Loki, trying to protect him as always, and that does help a little.

"I need to go inside," Loki grits out.

"Of course," one of the strangers - Thor's shield brothers - says.

Only that this one is a shield sister, and she smells like blood and vigilance and danger. The other, a man, smells like whatever he had for breakfast; Loki doesn't recognize the smell itself, he just knows that it's food. Something sweet, made of eggs and flour and milk...

They go inside. Loki keeps his eyes closed; he doesn't need to be able to see to follow them. He has to use every bit of self control he has not to pass out like Thor's Midgardian friend feared he would, and for now it's easier to navigate through the building by using his ears and nose only.

Dozens and dozens of new smells and sounds threaten to overwhelm him, but he makes it to their destination without losing his composure again. He distracts himself thinking about all the cake he is going to make Thor get him.

They sit down in a room that is, thankfully, mostly empty and mostly clean. Loki finally dares to open his eyes, even though he keeps them half-lidded, squinting against the light. There is just a table and some stairs, a potted plant in one corner that smells like green and dirt and life, the only pleasant smell in the room.

Thor is sitting to Loki's right, Jane on his left side. She's doing the best she can to help him stay calm - she is a very good Guide, but she is not *Loki's*, so the best she can do for him doesn't help him a lot, really. But still, this is... doable, he thinks. Very disturbing and uncomfortable, but doable. All his nerve endings are going haywire, but he's still in his right mind.

Maybe he will actually be able to help.

Except him, Thor and Jane, four people are now in the room. The man and woman from earlier and two other men - both smell oddly artificial in a way that makes Loki want to stay away from them, but he manages to block it out.

"Thank you for coming," the tall, blond one says, standing far too close to Loki's chair. "Thor told us a lot about you." He holds out his hand. "I'm Steve Rogers."

"I'm afraid I don't do... touches," Loki says, glancing at Rogers' hand. "But it's nice to meet you."

Something about his tone seems to make Rogers uncertain, he lets his hand sink and frowns slightly. Before he can say anything, Thor jumps in.

"My brother doesn't leave Asgard often," he says. "But he is very happy to be here."

"Don't talk for me, Thor."

"I'm just trying to -"

"Thor," Jane says, a warning note in her voice, but Loki doesn't let her talk for him, either.

"Do you really want to argue with me right now, brother dearest?"

Rogers clears his throat and changes the topic; he introduces the others. Natasha Romanoff, Clint Barton, Bruce Banner. Five Avengers, including Thor.

One is missing.

"Where is Tony?" Thor asks, and everybody in the room - except Loki and Jane - rolls their eyes.

"Late," Barton says. "As usual."

As if on cue, the door opens. A Guide enters the room, and everything - *everything* - changes.

*

He is a comparatively short man. He is well dressed, in a dark gray suit and shiny shoes. He has brown hair and hides his eyes behind colored glasses. He smells like coffee and oil and stress.

He is frozen in place, stunned into silence, and even with the glasses it's clear that he is staring at Loki as if his entire world just got turned upside down.

It's a sentiment Loki can very much relate to.

He's been told what it feels like. He knows it from stories, from conversations, from books. And in a way, it is exactly like he expected it would be - he notices everything, even the slightest detail, about the room he is in. The breaths of the others, the confused glances they exchange, the light coming through the window, the dust on the windowsill. Clothes rustling slightly as somebody moves. Every sound, every smell is so much clearer - and so much easier to deal with. Loki notices it all, and at the same time it feels like he is in a tunnel, and the only thing he really sees and hears and smells is the man who just entered the room.

"Loki," Thor says, slowly. Confused. His hand is dangerously close to Loki's shoulder.

"If you touch me," Loki says calmly, without taking his eyes away from the Guide, "I am going to cut off your fingers one by one."

"We need to leave the room," Jane says, similarly calm, but urgent. "Everyone out, now."

Someone protests. Loki doesn't care. The only thing he cares about is the man who is still staring at him, who automatically steps aside when Jane steers the unimportant people out of the room. The Guide is shying away from being touched by, from even getting *close* to other people, and that fills Loki with a deep, primal sort of satisfaction he hasn't known until now.

The last person finally leaves the room, and Loki teleports to the door to close it and lock it with magic. The Guide doesn't even flinch. They stand there for a long moment, unable to take their eyes off each other.

Finally, the Guide says, "What the hell is going on?"

It's the voice that does it. Loki can't hold himself back anymore, he steps forward, right up into the Guide's personal space, and he's already reaching out to touch him. He hesitates in the last second, though, manages to consider how confusing this must be for the Guide, but right now, Loki has no idea how to make him less confused, how to explain this. He just knows that he needs to touch *his Guide*, and he needs to touch him *right now*.

The Guide nods, slowly, as if he isn't quite sure why he is nodding, and grabs Loki's wrists to put them on his body. Loki's fingers dig into the Guide's sides, they both suck in a sharp breath, and then Loki pulls the Guide close and presses him against his own chest and *gods*, it's - it's -

Everything.

Loki turns his head, buries his nose in the Guide's hair. He doesn't smell like stress anymore, only like confusion, and also like warm and safe and *mine, mine, mine*.

The Guide wraps his arms around Loki in return and holds him just as tightly. He makes a quiet, content sound, and it almost makes Loki *purr*. He can hear the Guide's heartbeat, quick and excited against Loki's own chest, and he also hears his breaths and an odd humming sound he doesn't recognize, but at the moment he can't even bring himself to care about that. Loki has never been this comfortable in this entire life, and at the same time he has never been this alert. He is beyond reason right now, but if he weren't, he would be reasonably sure that he would kill every fool who even thought about approaching them right now.

"I still don't know what's going on," the Guide murmurs, his voice breathy and warm against Loki's neck, making him shiver. "Care to explain or do you need more cuddle time?"

Loki hums and rubs his nose against the Guide's hair. Gods, that smell. Loki is never going to get enough of it. But yes, he does need to explain; he can also smell that his Guide is getting worried again, and Loki doesn't like that. But letting go of him - and staying here? While they talk about *this*?

No, definitely not.

"I need to bring you somewhere else," he says and manages to pull back, although just slightly. Enough to look at his Guide. He frowns; the glasses need to disappear as soon as

possible. "Preferably to a place where nobody can interrupt us. Preferably... a place that smells like you."

"Okay," the Guide says easily. "I can get a jet ready, just -"

"I can teleport us. Just tell me where."

"You can teleport us."

"Yes," Loki murmurs and leans forward, pressing his lips to the Guide's temple. "As long as you can show me a picture of some sort."

The Guide nods and rifles through his pockets until he pulls out a small device - Loki isn't sure what it is, but the Guide's fingers seem to be very familiar with it, so it can't be anything dangerous. He waits until the Guide shows him the small screen, and after taking a proper look, he nods.

Seconds later, they are in a big room that smells *exactly* like his Guide. The noise of the city is gone; Loki can only hear the sound of waves and the wind, and given that he can't smell a single other person, they probably aren't in New York anymore. The next house has to be miles away. Loki preens, relieved and satisfied; his Guide couldn't have chosen a better place.

"Thank you," Loki says quietly and pulls his mate close. He wants to kiss his skin again. "This is much better."

The Guide chuckles; it's music to Loki's ears. "Okay. And now? Do you want to sit down?"

Loki nods, and the Guide drags him over to a sofa and makes him sit down. Loki pulls him down with him. "May I see your eyes?" he asks, then tugs at the Guide's jacket. Every single layer of clothing between them feels like one too many. "And take this off. It's in the way."

Another chuckle, and a crooked, blinding grin. The guide takes off his glasses and folds them, puts them aside. He has brown eyes, matching his hair, and there's a mischievous spark in them that Loki adores.

"You're pretty demanding," the Guide says, teasingly. "I'm still freaking out here, you know."

"There's no reason to freak out," Loki tells him at once. "Nothing will happen to you."

"If you say so." The Guide shrugs out of his jacket and puts it aside. "Loki, right?"

Oh, right. Names. Loki blinks. He completely forgot about that. "Yes. Loki." He reaches out and takes the Guide's hand, finally realizing that he isn't just *the Guide*. "My brother told me about you. Tony Stark."

"The one and only," he says, grin softening when he looks down at their hands.

"Is that your full name?"

"Yeah," he says. "Well, no. Anthony Edward Stark, that's my full name."

"Anthony," Loki decides. He feels dizzy. *Anthony*. For a moment, Loki is awestruck by the fact that he has actually, after centuries of hoping and waiting and doubting and despairing, *found his Guide*. Anthony, who was on Midgard the whole time and therefore out of Loki's reach, a *mortal* who wasn't even born yet a century ago.

Yes, everything has changed, and it's both exhilarating and frightening.

"Are you alright?" Anthony asks. "Because you look like I'm feeling, and I don't know if I'm alright."

"I'm alright," Loki says. "You're my Guide."

"Okay." Anthony nods. "I have no idea what that means."

"Well." Loki forces himself to think. Anthony doesn't know anything about this, and Loki has to explain. He can do that, or at least he thinks he can. He looks down at their hands as well, lets his fingertips trail over Anthony's palm, his wrist. "For you, it means that you attract others as if you are the light moths are drawn to." He speaks slowly, choosing his words carefully; he's aware that he still isn't thinking all too clearly, and he doesn't want to scare Anthony. "It means that you can control a room full of people with just a look, or a smile. It means that so far nobody has needed you in that particular way you want and need to be needed." He pauses. "It also means that you are lonely. Empathic, but wayward. Lost, at times. It means that you have been waiting for me."

Anthony thinks about that for a moment, then he asks, "Why you?"

Loki thinks about it for a moment, but his desire to think is once again overshadowed by his desire to *touch*. He runs his hand up Anthony's arm, careful and gently, then down his back. "May I? I -"

"Touch me all you want, it's alright," Anthony says, somewhere between bewildered and absolutely sincere.

Loki has to smile. He wraps arms around Anthony's middle and pulls him close against his side, brushing his cheek with his lips. Anthony relaxes, leans against him, puts his head on Loki's shoulder and buries his face in the crook of Loki's neck. He lets out a sigh, relieved, and Loki full-heartedly agrees because yes, this is much better.

"I feel like all my nerve endings are going haywire," Anthony murmurs quietly. "I've never felt anything like it. It's... "

He trails off, and Loki tries to calm him by holding him a little tighter. "That's normal. The bonding usually strengthens a Guide's senses a little, too."

Anthony sighs again. "Okay. Explain this whole thing to me like I'm five years old, would you?"

Loki nods, and finally says, "I am what my people call a Sentinel. That means that I have... exceptionally good senses, which is supposed to be very useful in, say, battles, or in any other

situation in which I have to protect others and myself."

"Okay, so you can see and hear and smell very well."

" *Very* well, yes. I am also," he runs his fingers up and down Anthony's arm again, "very sensitive to touches. I haven't touched another person in... eight decades, I think."

Anthony flinches and sits upright, looking at Loki out of wide eyes. "*Eight decades?* Are you kidding me?"

Loki raises a brow. "No, I am not. Not touching anyone is preferable over getting overwhelmed every time I try."

"Getting overwhelmed," Anthony echoes, frowning. "Like on the roof?"

"Yes," Loki says, surprised. "How do you -"

"I wasn't there, but I saw the footage," Anthony explains, waving his hand. "It's my tower, I've got cameras everywhere."

Ah. It's not uncommon for an unbonded guide to feel unsafe, so arrangements like that make sense. Loki nods. "I see."

"So why is this okay, then?"

"Hm?"

Anthony snorts and pokes Loki's stomach. "I don't know if you noticed, but we're definitely touching, and you seem fine to me."

"Oh," Loki says, and he smiles in reaction to Anthony's teasing tone. He feels so *warm*. "Yes, I am fine." What an understatement. "More than." His smile widens. "To answer your question, this is *okay* because for every Sentinel, there is a Guide who excels at helping them... regulate their reactions, so to say. Guides act like an anchor, a fixed point when things become too much to handle."

"Wait," Anthony says. "Wait. Are you saying that - that in the whole universe, there's only one *Guide* or whatever who can do that for you? Is that what you're saying?"

"That is what I'm saying," Loki confirms, happy that Anthony is catching on so quickly. "In Asgard, there are much more Sentinels than Guides, and while every Guide might be able to help every Sentinel to a degree, nobody will work as well as the Sentinel's mate, whose presence alone is usually enough to make their Sentinel feel... well." Loki swallows and looks away for a brief moment. "Safe. In control. Unbonded, it often doesn't take long until Sentinels go insane. I am the lucky exception, although I could barely even leave my rooms in the last two centuries."

"My head hurts," Anthony says distractedly. "How old are you, exactly?"

"Mh. A little older than a millennium. I'm young, younger than Thor."

"Young," Anthony echoes. "Yeah, right."

Loki frowns. "Does that bother you?"

"No," Anthony says, shaking his head. "No, it's just - a lot to deal with right now. I really didn't expect *this* to happen when Thor said he'd ask his baby brother for help." He takes a breath. "So, about that... mate thing. It's me."

"Yes," Loki says. "It's you."

"Does that mean we're like, soulmates?" Anthony asks flatly. "Because I'm starting to feel like I'm in a YA novel."

"I don't know what that is, but yes, soulmates is a word to describe it." He leans in to kiss Anthony's cheek. "To put it more simply, you are mine, and I am yours."

"Huh," Anthony says, a little absent. "That's - why doesn't that freak me out? I had commitment issues my whole fucking life, it should freak me out."

Something shifts in Loki's chest - sympathy, but the fiercely protective kind. *Commitment issues*. Also not uncommon; Loki wouldn't be surprised if Anthony has only a handful of people he is actually close to. By a human's standards, Anthony isn't young anymore - Loki doesn't know how old he is, exactly, he'll have to ask about it later - and it's very, very unusual for a Guide who has reached adulthood to still be unbonded. It's practically unheard of, because Guides are good at finding their mates. Loki only knows two who became adults without having bonded, and that only because their Sentinels had died before they could meet. Both Guides are difficult, lonely people who seem to be unable to actually settle down, and Anthony is probably similar. Lonely, that is, just like Loki said earlier; so far he doesn't find anything about Anthony difficult.

He hums and pulls Anthony even closer, wanting to show both him and himself that neither of them is alone anymore. By now Anthony is almost sitting in his lap. "How does it feel?"

"Shit, I don't know." Anthony lifts his hand and cups Loki's jaw, watching his thumb while he strokes his skin. He thinks about it, and after a moment his confused expression clears. "Right. It feels right."

"Yes," Loki agrees. It *is* right. He's been waiting for this, for Anthony for so long that he half feels like he's dreaming. And Anthony has been waiting for him, too, although he didn't even know it. That thought doesn't sit well with Loki. "I'm sorry I didn't come to Midgard sooner. I should have at least considered the possibility that you were here, considering that Thor found Jane here decades ago, but here in Midgard, Guides are so very rare. Sentinels even more so. Most don't even know what they are."

"Yeah, I can confirm that," Anthony deadpans. "How come Thor never explained?"

Loki lifts a shoulder. "It's a weakness. When their Guide isn't close by, a Sentinel can be distracted and overwhelmed very easily. Things work so differently here in Midgard, my brother decided to keep it to himself."

“Okay,” Anthony says slowly. “I’m not sure if I really - understand, but... fine. What’s going to happen now?”

“We will need to be alone for some time so that we can finish bonding.” He glances at their surroundings. “We can stay here, it’s safe enough, I think. Someone would need to bring us food, maybe Jane can -”

“I can have everything delivered,” Anthony says. “And the kitchen upstairs is stocked, anyway, so we - wait. No. Doom.”

“Excuse me?”

“Doctor Doom. You’re here to help us defeat him, remember? He’ll burn New York to the ground if we don’t do something, and that soon. We can’t just -”

“You want to fight,” Loki realizes, and the thought alone makes him feel sick.

Anthony raises a brow at him. “Problem?”

“I am going to kill everyone who tries to lay a hand on you.”

Anthony blinks. “Come again?”

“I can’t help it,” Loki says, defensive. He doesn’t manage to look at Anthony, and the words spill out of him without his permission. “Instinctively, my first priority is and always will be your safety, because I *need* you. If you got hurt, I -” He swallows, shakes his head. “I cannot take that risk, not now. I only just found you. Once our bond is strong enough, maybe in a week or two, we can -”

“Loki, we don’t have a week. We just don’t.”

“I *need* to keep you safe.”

Anthony looks at him for a long moment, and Loki is getting the feeling that he is doing something wrong. He tries to stay calm, to tell himself that Anthony simply doesn’t know how this *works*, because how could he? But Loki is so scared of losing him again that everything else is irrelevant. Still, he doesn’t say anything else, forces himself to wait until Anthony speaks up again.

“We only just met,” Anthony says, his tone gentle but firm. “And you don’t know me, so I’m cutting you some slack here. But I can keep myself safe just fine, alright? I fought in dozens of battles, and I don’t need your protection.”

That stings. Loki grits his teeth. A retort is already waiting on his tongue, something harsh and sharp, but Anthony shakes his head and puts his hands on Loki’s chest, fingers clinging to the leather of Loki’s jacket. He calms Loki down instinctively, both with the touch and in an entirely different way Loki can’t even really place - he just knows that Anthony meant no offence, that he doesn’t want to get rid of Loki’s protectiveness, he just wants to make clear that he isn’t some kind of damsel in distress. He doesn’t tell Loki so with words, not even telepathically - although Loki is sure that Anthony will be able to do that, in time -, it’s more

of a feeling, a quiet reassurance that trickles through their still weak bond over to Loki. He isn't sure if Anthony even knows he's doing it, but he does seem to notice that the irritation that flared up in Loki already lost its edges.

"Still," Anthony continues, thoughtful now. "I know what you mean, okay? It's weird and I don't get it, but I can't stand the thought of anything happening to you, either. And believe me, I'd much rather stay here with you than go and fight a wanna-be wizard, but I don't - I just don't think we have the choice right now. They need us out there."

"I can't guarantee their safety," Loki says, quiet and urgent. "And it's likely that you wouldn't be of great use, either."

Oh, that wasn't the right thing to say; Loki sees that at once. Anthony quirks a brow, challenging Loki to say more. The look in his eyes is hard. "Now what's that supposed to mean?"

"Think about it," Loki says, aware that it sounds like he's pleading, but unable to do anything about it. "Since you saw me, have you been able to concentrate on anything else? Because I certainly haven't. And when the others were still in the room with us, could you think about anything else except how much you wanted them gone?"

Anthony doesn't say anything, he just looks at Loki, and the displeased expression on his face tells Loki that he's right.

"It's nothing we can simply switch off," Loki adds quietly, "or ignore. I'm sorry, but it would be safer for everyone if we stayed here."

Anthony stays quiet for a long while. It's clear that he doesn't like this at all, and Loki doesn't know how to feel about it. On the one hand he's never gotten along well with Guides who simply follow their Sentinels around everywhere, too focused on their mates' wellbeing to have any wants or ambitions themselves, and seemingly that won't be a problem with Anthony, which is a relief.

On other hand *not* being his Guide's first priority feels awfully much like a rejection.

"Okay," Anthony says finally, sounding a little grim. Loki doesn't like it. "I've no idea how this stuff works, so if you say it's better for everyone if we stay here, we'll stay here."

Loki breathes a sigh of relief, but Anthony isn't done.

"We can't just leave them hanging, though. We don't fight, fine, but there's something else we can do. No, have to do."

Anthony makes an odd hand movement, and suddenly there's something hovering in the air in front of the sofa, something oblong and light blue that reminds Loki a little of his own illusions. He stares at it, and keeps staring as Anthony moves it with his fingers, tapping and swiping until it shows a crisp picture of a stone wall, covered in drawings and letterings Loki can't really make sense of.

"Doom's been dropping these weird symbol thingies everywhere in the city," Anthony says, tapping a point on the wall. The *symbol thingy* he's talking about lights up. "We don't really know what they are, only that they react when somebody walks past them, and each of them differently. So far we've had explosions, quicksand, a freaking avalanche in Chinatown, a flock of really aggressive birds that would put Hitchcock to shame - it's like Kinder surprise, but the unpleasant magic version."

Loki starts a mental list of things he doesn't understand and puts three words on it right away - Chinatown, Hitchcock, Kinder surprise -, but he doesn't get the chance to ask about it right now because Anthony isn't finished.

"We had to evacuate whole quarters," he says somewhat darkly. "So far only two people died, I guess we've been lucky. We've been trying to find a way to stop it, but we just can't get rid of the symbols, and new ones appear every day. They're keeping us so busy that we can't even start to track Doom down."

It sounds like New York is a very dangerous city at the moment, so Loki is very glad that his Guide isn't there anymore, but also very angry at that *Doom* person for putting Anthony and everything he cares about in danger. Because it's clear that Anthony does care about this, and not quite in the way Loki expected. He is used to warriors fighting for fame and glory, but he'd be surprised if Anthony's motivations were similar. He's not a Guide himself and therefore not an empath, but Anthony makes his emotions very clear, and the force of them makes Loki's own chest ache when it rushes toward him through their bond. More prominent than almost everything else, there's the need to help, mingled with guilt and a hint of shame - which Loki doesn't know the reason for, at least not yet; he's not very good at reading emotions like this -, and there is anger, determination, protectiveness. The latter three are things Loki would expect from a Sentinel, not from a Guide, but it makes pride flicker up in Loki, anyway.

Anthony is a good man. Better than Loki, certainly; if not for his Guide (well. and perhaps Thor), he wouldn't really care about what Doom does to New York and its people. But yes, he does care about Anthony, and if Anthony wants and needs him to help, Loki isn't about to hesitate.

"They are sigils," he explains, studying the screen in front of them. "Does Doom have any relations to Alfhelmr?"

"Elves, right?" Anthony asks. "As far as I know, he doesn't."

"Well, either he must have had help, or maybe he found a book about elvish magic," Loki says. "Either way, the sigils *are* elvish magic; something a novice might manage. They aren't difficult to get rid of if you know how and have a little bit of magic talent. Thor can do it, I think, but he'll have to use a different reverse spell for every type of sigil, and I'm certain he doesn't know them." He thinks about it for a moment, frowning. "I need to see them all, then I can write down the instructions."

Anthony perks up at that, determined. "Okay, sounds like a plan. I've got drones everywhere in the city, looking for the - symbol things. Sigils. I can show you them all, come on."

He grabs Loki's hand and pulls him up, then leads him over to what seems to be a desk. On it, there are several more illusions like the earlier one, only that these look very solid. Anthony makes Loki sit down and bends over his shoulder, his hands already making a board with letters and numbers light up on the desk. He taps away on it and the screens in front of them become alive, and soon Loki can see the pictures he needs.

"Okay," Anthony says again, and on another screen appears something that looks like a piece of paper. "You can write here. Do you know how to use a keyboard?"

Keyboard. Loki raises his brows and looks down at the letters on the board in front of him. "I think I can figure it out," he says dryly.

Anthony grins, then they get to work. He helps Loki with the technology now and then, and Loki can't help but be impressed. Thor has mentioned that Tony Stark is considered to be a genius, but the way Anthony thinks and talks and handles these utensils reminds Loki of a mage. He assumes that this is only a tiny taste of everything Anthony is capable of and gods, Loki is hungry for more.

It takes a long while. When they are finally done, Loki's patience has long started to waver, but Anthony's hands are on his shoulder and he keeps burying his nose in Loki's hair, seeking contact Loki is more than willing to provide. It's equal parts helpful and distracting, because it grounds Loki and helps him concentrate, but there is also nothing he wants more than to turn off all these screens and focus on Anthony.

Thankfully, Anthony seems to feel the same, because as soon as they are done with the last sigil, he reaches out to make the screens go black. He lets out a sigh and rests his chin on the top of Loki's head. "Finally," he mutters. "I think I'm not willing to concentrate on anything else today."

Loki has to smile. He leans his head back so that Anthony has to lift his, and Loki looks up at him and tries to deal with the fierce sense of *belonging* that is surging up in him. Anthony. Loki doesn't know him yet, not really, but he knows that he won't let go of him again.

"It's odd," Anthony says quietly, a slight crease between his eyes. "I feel... I can tell what you're feeling, I think."

"You're a Guide," Loki replies. "You're *my* Guide. You will always be able to tell what I am feeling, but in time you will learn to shut me out. I've been told that it can be both distracting and annoying."

Anthony's frown deepens, and he shakes his head. One of his hands wanders from Loki's shoulder down to his chest. "It's very... weak. Just an idea, you know? But I can definitely sense something."

"It will probably get stronger in the coming days."

"Hm. Can you - I mean, does it work the other way around, too, or is it a one-way street?"

“At the moment, it depends on what you are willing to let me see,” Loki says. “Or sense, rather. It doesn’t come as naturally to me as it comes to you, but in time I might be able to use our bond in the same way. For now, if you project something -”

“Project something? How do I do that?”

Loki raises a brow. “You have done it already. Twice, in fact.”

“I didn’t even notice,” Anthony says, still frowning. He doesn’t understand, and Loki can tell that he doesn’t like not understanding things.

“You will learn,” Loki promises. “We both will.”

“I should be bombarding you with questions,” Anthony murmurs and stands up straight, rubbing his eyes. “But I feel like I can’t think straight, it’s fucking annoying. Let’s - do you want to eat something? There’s food upstairs, and a bed. A nap sounds like a good idea. Why am I so tired?”

“Because bonding is tiring,” Loki says. “A nap *does* sound like a good idea.”

Anthony nods and takes his hand again. He seems to be as eager for contact as Loki is. Loki suggests they skip the food and go straight to bed, because Loki *needs* to touch Anthony just as much and as definitely as he needs air, and food is rather irrelevant at the moment. But Anthony is adamant.

“You’re hungry,” he says, like it’s a fact. In reaction to Loki’s raised brow, he shrugs and adds, “I can tell. I think. Aren’t you hungry?”

“I’m always hungry.”

Anthony laughs. “Is that a Sentinel thing?”

“Yes.”

“Explains why Thor’s always eating. And why he’s so big.” Anthony glances at him. “You’re skinny, though.”

Loki knows that Guides worry about their Sentinels easily and a lot, and he doesn’t want Anthony to worry, even though it does make a spark of fondness and satisfaction flare up in his chest. “I’m fine,” he says warmly, and Anthony accepts it with a nod.

They arrive in what looks like the kitchen, and Loki frowns in reaction to the new smells. The kitchen doesn’t smell like Anthony as the earlier room and the rest of the house did, and Loki wraps himself around Anthony from behind before he even knows he’s doing so. He rubs his nose against the back of Anthony’s neck, breathing him in. He smells so *warm*.

Anthony snorts, but leans back against him. “You alright?”

Loki hums. “Yes, quite. I simply need to be...” He pauses. “Close.”

“Okay. So it’s not just me being - I don’t know, needy?”

“Hm?”

Anthony squirms a little, and Loki can see the tips of his ears go pink. He can smell it, too - embarrassment always smells a little sour - and hear that Anthony’s heartbeat is elevated. Loki holds him tighter, and after a moment Anthony says, “I want to be close to you, too. It’s like - an itch.” He lifts his hand and pats his chest. “Right here. God, that’s cheesy. But -”

“It’s the bond,” Loki explains, his lips brushing Anthony’s red ear. “It’s forming, and it needs us to be close. There is no reason to be embarrassed.”

Anthony chuckles, a little nervous. “I thought you can’t tell what I’m feeling.”

“Not in the same way as you,” Loki says, smiling. “But, and I do believe I told you this, I have very good senses. And I can sense that you’re blushing.”

“And I can sense that you’re enjoying this too much,” Anthony says, but he doesn’t sound actually bothered. No, his voice is warm, amused, even when he adds, “Can I open the fridge now or do you want to keep playing octopus?”

“Yes,” Loki says, even though he doesn’t know what an octopus is. He adds it to his list and also makes a mental note that he has to read up on... well, everything about Midgard.

“Fine,” Anthony says, still amused. He does manage to open the fridge, which is apparently where he keeps his food. Anthony stares into it for a moment, frowning. “Loki?”

“Yes?”

“It’s coming to my attention that I can’t cook. I’m horrible at it. Why am I horrible at it?”

Loki blinks and rests his chin on Anthony’s shoulder, peering into the fridge as well. It’s full of things he doesn’t even recognize. “Do you cook often?”

“No.”

“Well, that might be the explanation.”

“You’re hungry, though,” Anthony says, then sighs. “God, I feel like a mother hen. Soon I’ll wrap you up in blankets and feed you soup. Is that normal?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Great. How about scrambled eggs? I think I can manage scrambled eggs. And toast. Have you had toast before?”

“No.”

“Time for toast, then.”

So he makes scrambled eggs and toast. They take the plates to the bedroom, which also doesn't smell as much as Anthony as the first room did, but Loki is actually glad about it. It just means that the room will smell of them *both* very soon, and that makes him giddy.

They make themselves comfortable on the bed, Loki leaning against the headboard with Anthony right next to him, his legs in Loki's lap. Anthony is already eating a forkful of scrambled eggs, but Loki ignores his plate in favor of reaching out and loosening Anthony's tie. Anthony lifts his chin and lets him, but he does raise a questioning brow.

"I want you to be comfortable," Loki says and pulls the tie over Anthony's hand. He tosses it aside and proceeds to open the first few buttons of Anthony's shirt. "This doesn't look comfortable."

"It's fine," Anthony says, sounding like he is trying not to laugh. He also grabs Loki's wrist to keep him from opening more buttons, which makes Loki frown. "And you don't look comfortable, either, you know. Though leather is a really good look on you."

Loki feels like something is up, something to do with Loki trying to undress him and Anthony not wanting to be undressed, but he decides not to push. He has no right to demand something Anthony isn't ready for. And besides, the praise distracts him a little; the thought that Anthony enjoys looking at him is a very good one. Still, Anthony is right, Loki is used to wearing his armor but it isn't comfortable at all, so he uses magic to change his clothes and then takes his plate. When he looks at Anthony again, he is staring at Loki, his mouth hanging open.

Loki idly begins to eat. "Didn't your mother tell you to keep your mouth closed when you're chewing?"

"She probably did," Anthony agrees, talking with his mouth full, anyway. Then, "shit, you're a wizard."

"Mage."

"You can do magic."

"I was under the impression that you knew that."

"I did, but - I was distracted, okay? Oh my god. I *am* going to bombard you with questions."

Loki looks at him, amused as well and... pleased. Definitely pleased. "You are interested in learning about magic?"

"Are you kidding? Duh. It's *magic*. I've been wanting to learn everything about it for ages, but Thor hasn't been very helpful, and who else am I supposed to ask, Doctor Doom? Yeah, right. You," he points at Loki with his fork, "are going to get very tired of answering my questions very soon, and I don't even care."

He's intelligent. Kind. *Curious*. Loki has to avert his eyes, he looks down at his plate. "I could never grow tired of you."

Anthony slowly lets his fork sink. His eyes are narrowed; he's concerned. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Don't lie to me, I can tell. What's wrong?"

Loki sighs and pokes around in his portion of eggs, thinking about it. It's difficult to narrow it down, mostly because he can't even begin to make sense of his emotions. He's happy, that he knows, and relieved, but there is also...

Gods, he's terrified. The fear crawls up his chest and into his throat and proceeds to sit there in the form of a lump that makes it difficult to speak.

"This is a huge change," he manages finally, not looking at Anthony. "For both of us. And it is... definite."

Anthony keeps looking at him carefully. "You mean irrevocable."

"Yes. The bond will not go away. From now on, it is you and me, and it will always be you and me, and I wish to make you happy."

Anthony takes his time as he considers that, and then he says, "That's sweet. And a bit scary. No, really, I get why you're scared, I think I'm scared, too, mostly because I don't know how this is supposed to work. But we'll figure it out, okay? I'm good at figuring things out. Now eat up, I want to cuddle."

Loki takes both of their plates and puts them on the ground next to the bed, ignoring Anthony's weak protests. "We can eat later," he tells him, and Anthony sighs and gives in.

"Okay, fine. But let me change quickly, alright?"

"Of course."

Anthony smiles and leaves first the bed and then the room. He leaves the door open, thankfully, allowing Loki to catch a glimpse of rows of clothes. That must be Anthony's dressing room. Loki can hear him move around, the rustling of his clothes as he changes them, even his heartbeat. It calms him somewhat, but still he desperately wants to follow him everywhere he goes. He thinks that maybe they both need a moment of privacy, though. Well, that is what he thinks in the first ten seconds, then he starts to get uncomfortable because he does not want to be further apart from his Guide than absolutely necessary, and this is very unnecessary.

He is about to leave the bed when Anthony returns, dressed in loose, soft looking pants and a shirt with short sleeves. Looking at his arms makes Loki want to undress him completely, but he keeps himself in check and merely reaches out for Anthony, inviting him back to the bed. Anthony obliges his unspoken wish and soon Loki can tuck himself against Anthony's side, half lying on top of him with his face buried in the curve of his neck.

Anthony's heartbeat is calm and steady, but there is something else that catches Loki's attention. The humming sound he heard earlier, shortly after they first touched. It's been there

the whole time, but Loki has been blocking it out mostly because he knows it's nothing dangerous. Although he can't tell how he knows that, which now worries him a little. He lifts his head again and tries to figure out where the sound is coming from, exactly; it takes him less than a second because the origin is literally right next to his ear.

"What is this?" he asks, and he wants to touch Anthony's chest, but Anthony's hand is faster and takes his wrist.

"It's -" Anthony says, but stops. After a moment, he manages, "It's nothing dangerous," as if to echo Loki's thoughts.

Loki is very good at telling when somebody lies, and not only because he's a Sentinel. He scowls at Anthony. "You don't want me to know."

"No, I -" Anthony takes a breath. "It's just a difficult topic."

"Difficult how?" Loki sits up, going from annoyed to worried within seconds. He looks at Anthony's chest, eyes narrowed; he can see the outline of something round pressing against the fabric. Maybe he was wrong, maybe - if his Guide is in danger because of whatever is happily humming away in his chest, Loki will rip it out and heal him *right now*. He forces himself to ignore his instincts and stay calm, for now. "Is it dangerous?"

Anthony sighs and props himself up on his elbows, not quite managing to hold Loki's gaze. "Depends on how you define 'dangerous', really."

Loki likes this less and less. "Well, how would you define it?"

"I'd like to postpone this conversation, okay? Just until -"

"I won't stop thinking about it just because we postpone this conversation," Loki cuts him off, impatience and worry making it sound sharper than intended. Anthony tenses up even more, and Loki feels horrible at once. He swallows and tries to soften his voice when he adds, "Anthony, please."

That seems to work. With another sigh, Anthony sits up as well, fiddling around with the hem of his shirt. "I feel like this might make you freak out," he says carefully. "So just, uh, keep in mind that I'm fine, okay?"

"I'll try," Loki says flatly.

"Thanks." Anthony's tone is just as dry. "So, uh... well, four years ago, I was... in an accident. Only that it wasn't an accident, it was an ambush, and a bomb I'd built blew up in my face and I almost died, but I didn't. But there's still shrapnel in my chest and this," he taps his chest, "keeps it from reaching my heart. It also powers my suits."

"Your suits."

"My armor," Anthony explains. "Iron Man. You know I'm Iron Man, right?"

Oh. Yes. Thor mentioned something like that. “Yes.” Loki glances at Anthony’s chest again. “Who ambushed you?”

“They’re dead.”

Loki is inclined to drag the souls of whoever it was out of hel and kill them again himself. “Does it hurt you?”

“It’s fine, really. I’m used to it.”

“Does it,” Loki repeats very slowly, “hurt you.”

“Jesus, you’re stubborn. No, it doesn’t hurt me. Most of the time, anyway. It’s not comfortable and yeah, sometimes I’m in a bit of pain because of it, but mostly it’s alright. Better than dying at least. Can we stop talking about this now?”

He’s annoyed. Obviously. Still, Loki isn’t yet willing to let the topic go. “May I see?”

Anthony sends him a look that is very nearly a glare. “You won’t shut up about it until I show it to you, will you?”

“Probably not, no.”

Anthony rolls his eyes and then pulls up his shirt - quickly, as if he’s scared he will change his mind otherwise. Now Loki notices that he is actually wearing two shirts on top of each other, and now that Loki can see his chest, he can guess why. The round thing is glowing light blue; Anthony probably wanted to hide that. It is indeed humming, albeit very quietly, and Loki knows without asking more about it that Anthony built it, and that it is proof of his brilliance. It smells... a little bit like copper, but also sweet, and there’s something in it that almost feels alive - in the way Loki’s magic feels alive. He cocks his head to one side and just looks at it for a moment, fighting down another wave of anger when he sees the scars surrounding the metal. Putting that thing in there must have hurt terribly, and Loki doubts that it doesn’t still hurt. It must at least hinder Anthony’s breathing.

“If you are ever in pain,” Loki says, “no matter for what reason, please tell me. Yes?”

Anthony shrugs lightly. “Sure.”

“Thank you.” Loki reaches out and carefully pulls Anthony’s shirts back down; it’s not hard to notice that Anthony isn’t all too comfortable showing Loki his chest, and even though that hurts a bit, Loki understands. Some things simply take time. “And thank you for showing me, too. I apologize if I got too insistent, but I...” He trails off and pushes Anthony onto his back so that Loki can huddle up against him again. He presses his nose against the soft skin of Anthony’s neck and takes a deep breath. “I can’t stand the thought of you hurting.”

“You really mean that,” Anthony says, quiet and disbelieving.

“Of course.” Loki presses his lips against Anthony’s skin. “I told you, your safety is my first priority.”

“Why? You don’t even know me.”

Loki thinks about it for a moment. He doesn’t understand it himself, not really - nobody does. Mates are mates because they fit, because they can give each other what they want and need. He doesn’t know Anthony, no, but he likes what he’s learned so far, and he’s eager to learn everything else there is to know. It’s strange, wanting that connection to another being; Loki has always been happy to stay as far away from other people as possible. Now that he’s met Anthony, though, he feels like the two of them can never be close enough.

“I need you,” he says finally. “I can’t remember ever being in control of my senses before, and you make it possible. But you are also... more than that. Not just something I need, but a person I want to know.” He kisses Anthony’s neck again, can’t really get enough of it. “In every way you’ll let me.”

“I barely even know anything about you,” Anthony murmurs. His hand is in Loki’s hair, suddenly, fingers raking through the strands. “But I want to know everything. I really want to.”

Loki only hums in agreement, it’s difficult to concentrate on anything else now that they’re so close and Anthony is touching him. Anthony stays quiet, too, just keeps stroking Loki’s hair. Loki listens to his heartbeat; it’s the most soothing lullaby he has ever heard.

They will deal with everything else tomorrow. For now, this is enough.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

This is an unedited mess, but I'm kinda tired of working on it, sooo here it is. There'll probably be a third chapter at some point, but I'm not making any promises as to when 😊 I hope you like it!

Tony is not alone when he wakes up. That's the first thing he thinks, the first thing he feels even before he really knows that he is awake. The shock of it makes his chest go tight, and he has to sit up and take a few steadying breaths before he manages to open in his eyes. When he finally does that, he looks at the other side of the bed, where Loki is lying comfortably curled up on his side, still asleep. Tony brushed his arm away when he moved, but Loki's hand is still stretched out on the now empty space beside him, as if he's still reaching out for Tony.

God. Tony is used to strange things and surprising plot twists, but this tops everything. He still isn't entirely sure what's even going on, because everything about this is weird and surreal and confusing, but he does know a few things. He knows that he just woke up actually rested for what's probably the first time in his life, and he knows that he wants Loki - though in what way is still uncertain - and he knows that he doesn't even really care what the fuck is going on as long as it keeps making him feel this... content. Safe. He probably hasn't felt like this since he was a little kid.

He decides to take a shower, but it takes a while until he manages to convince his limbs to move. As soon as his feet touch the ground, Loki stirs.

"Anthony?"

He's surprised. Alarmed. Concerned, self-conscious, scared to be left behind. Tony feels all of that in his own chest, an echo of emotions that aren't his own but could be his own very easily. It should probably freak him out, and maybe it is freaking him out, but it also feels like something just finally slotted into place.

"Everything's fine," he says, giving Loki a crooked, still sleepy smile. "I'm just going to take a shower."

Loki blinks at him slowly, and he's still sleepy, too. His hand comes up to rub his eyes and brush his tousled hair out of his face. "Where?"

"In the bathroom," Tony says dryly. It doesn't do a great job at soothing Loki, so Tony adds, "There, that door. I can leave it open?"

Loki follows Tony's gaze and looks at the door for a long moment, then he nods. "Yes. Please."

"I won't be long." Tony finally stands up and heads to said door. He's never been this happy to have an en-suite. "Your turn when I'm done, okay? I mean, if you want."

Loki just hums. His eyes stay fixed on Tony; he can feel his gaze prickling his neck until he's out of sight. Tony leaves the door wide open, but moves away from it far enough that Loki isn't able to see him undress. It's not a deliberate decision, just him looking for some privacy, and when he's already naked he pauses, because suddenly he's not sure if he wants that privacy at all.

He stands there like an idiot for a minute or two, absentmindedly tapping the arc reactor. There's an ache in his chest that's very different from the pain he's been in constantly since Afghanistan. Maybe his heart is finally going to give out. Is this what a heart attack feels like? Or a stroke? Fucking hell.

He's probably just panicking.

"Loki?"

"I'm here." Loki answers at once. There's some rustling, he is probably moving in the bed. "I can hear you."

Everything about this is so weird that Tony is going to burst out into a hysterical laughing fit soon. For now he just snorts.

"I heard that, too."

For some reason, it helps. It helps to know that Loki is right there in the other room, listening, and Tony isn't sure *why* it helps, but he doesn't even care right now. He steps into the shower and forces himself not to hurry.

Ten minutes later, he wraps a towel around his hips and shuffles through the bedroom into his walk-in closet, because - god, he doesn't know, because fuck privacy, maybe? Loki's gaze makes his skin tingle in a way that shouldn't be possible, and maybe Tony is already addicted.

He takes on a fresh t-shirt - one layer is enough this morning, he tells himself - and a pair of boxers, and then he drops the wet towel on the floor and crawls back into bed.

The ache in his chest fades as soon as Loki touches him.

Tony smiles and allows Loki to pull him close, one leg already hooked around Tony's own legs, his foot against the hollow of Tony's knee. Loki cuddles like an octopus, or maybe like a goddamn boa constrictor. Either way, Tony lets out a breath, relieved, and he's still smiling. Their heads are on the same pillow.

"I prefer having you close," Loki murmurs, looking at Tony as if he just can't get enough of looking at him.

"Yeah, I can tell." Tony chuckles and shifts even closer, until their noses bump into each other. It's crazy, but Tony craves this kind of closeness like he usually only craves a good drink and some quality time in the workshop.

"Please tell me if anything bothers you," Loki says, earnest. "Anything at all. I don't want you to be uncomfortable."

"I'm not uncomfortable," Tony says. "But thanks, I guess. And ditto."

Loki hums in acknowledgement and strokes Tony's side and lower back, the warmth of his hand seeping through the shirt. "Is this alright, then?"

"More than."

Loki smiles and keeps letting his hand wander, always staying on top of Tony's clothes. Tony has to think about what Loki said yesterday, that he hasn't touched another person in decades, and it pulls at something in his chest - sympathy. Tony isn't exactly used to comfortable intimacy either, but really, *decades*? Shit, he's going to cuddle Loki to death.

Well, maybe not all the way to death. That would be a shame.

"What are you thinking about?"

Tony looks at Loki, who has raised a brow, curious. Tony smiles at him. "Take a guess."

"I can't tell," Loki says. "You're not letting me in currently."

Right. "I don't know how that works."

"You will learn." Loki's hand settles on Tony's side, squeezing gentle. "I can teach you some of it, I think, and Jane can do the rest."

Tony nods. He isn't used to needing to be taught stuff, but he figures it's necessary, given that he doesn't know anything except what Loki told him, and that wasn't really a lot, probably just the basics barely scraping the surface.

"Didn't you want to take a shower?" Tony asks, mostly just to change the topic.

"No. I am firmly against moving away from here."

Away from you, he means, and Tony thinks they both know that. He snorts. "Fine by me."

Loki smiles at him, broadly enough that Tony can see his dimples. It's - well, it's already adorable from a purely objective standpoint, but since Tony is the exact opposite of objective, Loki's smile is better than sunshine and flying and AC/DC. There's something about him that just draws Tony in, something about the way he *feels*. Because yeah, that smile of his? Not only something Tony sees. He feels it deep in his bones.

"You're happy," Tony says, quietly.

Loki doesn't seem surprised that Tony knows that, or says it with such certainty. His smile doesn't waver. "Yes," he says, and his hand wanders to Tony's face, the touch of his fingertips against Tony's jaw barely even noticeable. "Happy we finally met. I have waited a long time for this."

"*Long* is probably an understatement, huh?"

"Yes," Loki says again.

"Yeah, uh." Tony frowns. "Sorry about that."

"It's hardly your fault. And besides, all the waiting still led me to meeting you, so it was worth it."

Loki is a charmer, that much is clear. It's not very surprising; Thor has mentioned once or twice that his brother can be very charming when he wants to be. What's surprising is that Tony *is* charmed, because that doesn't happen all too often.

"I feel like I'm high," he says. "Smitten and high. That normal?"

Loki chuckles. "Yes, quite. Because of the forming bond couples that just met are often... out of their mind. It will wear off soon."

"You mean I won't be smitten anymore soon?"

"Well," Loki says, raising a brow, "I do hope that you will still be smitten -"

"Really now."

"- but it's likely that you will see me a little more clearly, yes."

Something about that doesn't sit well with Tony. He looks at Loki, frowning, because that's - that's not what he *means*.

"I see you," he says. "Very clearly. I just -" He doesn't know how to explain it, but what tumbles out after a moment is, "I guess I'm happy, too."

"Good," Loki murmurs, and it could sound simple but it doesn't, because he says it with such serious and earnest *satisfaction* that Tony believes that Loki has never called anything good before. Like Tony's happiness is the only thing deserving of such praise.

Tony decides to move even closer and hide his face against Loki's neck, because no, nope, he is *not* going to cry. This is too much. It's absurd. Fucking crazy alien ballup -

"What is it?" Loki asks, alarmed. "Anthony?"

"M'fine," Tony says. "Gimme a moment."

Loki gives him a moment. Moments, really. He rolls onto his back and tugs at Tony until he's lying half on top of him with his head on Loki's chest and Loki's arms wrapped around him

just loosely enough that Tony doesn't feel trapped. Loki himself lets out a relieved sigh, but he's still distressed. Tony can tell. So when he thinks that he is at least somewhat in control of that chaos in his own chest, he tries to take care of Loki's, and it's surprisingly easy.

"I'm fine," he says again, the words muffled against the crook of Loki's neck. "Really. S'just. A lot."

"It is," Loki agrees quietly. "What do you want me to do?"

Tony sighs. He doesn't know how to answer that question. What he wants right now is to stay right here, with Loki, forever, but that's a, not a thing he can just say and b, not very realistic. So what he says in the end is, "What else can you hear?"

Loki doesn't question him. "Your heartbeat," he says, tone soft. "Your... the device in your chest, it hums. Something is moving downstairs - something metallic. It's not alive, I think."

"That's probably Dum-E or U," Tony explains, smiling. "Robots I built. And no, they're not alive, at least not in the flesh and bone and beating heart sense of the word."

"I see."

"What else?"

"Your heartbeat."

Tony chuckles into Loki's skin. "You've already mentioned that."

Loki laughs as well, brief and quiet; it makes his chest rumble slightly. "I believe it might be my favorite." Before Tony can say anything to that, Loki adds, "There is also the rain."

Tony lifts his head to look at the big windows, frowning. The sky is dark and cloudy, but he can see no rain. "It's not raining."

"Not here. A few miles away it just started to drizzle."

Tony looks back at Loki. "And you can hear that."

Loki raises a brow, apparently amused by Tony's disbelief. "Yes. I can hear cars as well, but the street is quite a bit away. And the ocean, of course, but you should be able to hear that, too."

Tony does, but the waves are just quiet background noise for him. "Uh, how good are your ears, exactly? And do you mind if I drag you down to my workshop at some point to find out how good your ears are, exactly?"

Loki's other eyebrow joins the first. "I don't think I mind, no. And my hearing is even better now that I have you." He closes his eyes, head dropping back on the pillow. "It used to be a... constant downpour. I couldn't ignore a single sound I heard, never."

"Sounds like you also had a constant headache."

Loki chuckles again and opens his eyes. “Yes. There was always either too much or too little stimuli, so I was either overwhelmed or restless, never anything in between.” He props himself up on his elbows, the look in his eyes fond. “But now I can filter out information by concentrating on you, and you are more than enough to keep my senses occupied.” In reaction to Tony's skeptical look, Loki raises a brow. “What is it?”

“That makes no sense,” Tony says at once. “I’m not - I mean, yeah, I’m extraordinarily intelligent and attractive -”

“And so very humble.”

“Shut up. Point is, maybe I’m special in some sense of the word, but I’m not actually *different* than anybody else on this planet, or in the universe. My heartbeat sounds like everyone else’s. Why me?”

Loki slowly shakes his head, as if he doesn’t know the answer, either. “I understand that you are a scientist,” he says. “I am, too, and I know how frustrating it is not to be able to figure out how something works. But I’m afraid I can’t give you a satisfying explanation, because if there is one, we haven’t found it yet. All I can tell you is that I could listen to your heartbeat for hours without getting bored while everyone else’s is a dull inconvenience.”

Tony swallows and tries to act as if that’s not the single most romantic thing anybody has ever said to him. Of course, the bar isn’t very high. The only sincere, sort of romantic thing he’s been told so far is that he is a fantastic lay.

“Okay,” he says. “That’s - I mean. Good.”

“Yes,” Loki says. “It is.” He smiles and glances downward. “I can also hear your stomach.”

Tony, still dazed, just stares at him. “What?”

“Your stomach. You’re hungry.”

“I didn’t even *feel* it rumble.”

“Well, I heard it.”

“That’s gross. Don’t ever tell me about hearing my bodily functions again.”

“Of course,” Loki says, in a tone that makes Tony think like Loki might have filed that away for later use, in case he ever wants to be an annoying little shit. “My apologies.”

Tony gives him a knowing look and then moves to get out of bed. “I *am* hungry, though. You too. Let’s eat something.”

“Did you just tell me that I am hungry? Again?”

“Yeah. Just like you told me that I'm hungry like half a minute ago. Now get your skinny ass out of bed, we’re making pancakes.”

*

They make pancakes. Well, Tony makes pancakes, Loki opens every single cabinet in the kitchen, peers into the fridge and the oven, and opens several packages just to see what's in them. He also tries out the mixer and flinches at the sound, hurrying to turn it off again. After that he makes no move to touch anything else.

"Never been in a Midgardian kitchen before, huh?" Tony asks, trying not to laugh.

"No." Loki is still glaring at the mixer. "I know a lot about Midgard in theory, but there are still many things I am not familiar with. It will take a while until I'll be used to being here."

Tony keeps the first pancake from burning in the very last second. He really needs to work on his cooking skills. "You want to stay, then?"

"Of course."

"For how long?"

Loki looks at him, his head cocked to the side. "Excuse me?"

"You said it'll take a few weeks until the bond is - uh, fully formed or whatever, right?" Tony avoids looking at Loki by keeping his eyes fixed on the pan. "Is that how long you want to stay, or - I don't know. Longer?"

Loki is quiet for a moment. "I will stay with you as long as you'll have me," he says then, slowly. "However, if you don't want me here, we -"

"What? No. That's not - not what I *mean*, I -" Tony poured batter into the pan, trying to figure out how to say this without sounding like a complete, socially incapable dumbass. "You've got a life up in Godland, right? And things to do. You probably don't want to hang out down here with me until the end of time. You'll leave eventually, and I - I'd like to know when." He clears his throat. "If you don't know when yet that's fine, of course, it's not - you know, no stress. You can stay here as long as you want and need."

Loki leans against the counter next to Tony. "I might wish to leave Midgard eventually, yes. I can't imagine ever wishing to leave *you*, though, so if that is what you're worrying about, please don't."

Tony mulls that over. "You're saying that when you leave, you'll want me to come with you."

"Of course."

Tony blinks at him, and then he averts his eyes to stare at the pan. "You're very sure about this."

"Yes." A beat, then Loki adds, "It's alright if you are not. You haven't had any time to prepare for this, after all, and it is all very new for you."

"I am sure," Tony says, a bit distracted "Sure as I can be, anyway. I'm just not used to people being sure about wanting to be with me, that's all."

Great, now he sounds like a dumbass who's not only socially incapable but also sad and pathetic as fuck. He should just shut up entirely. Thankfully, Loki doesn't pity him - sympathy rolls off him in waves, yes, but that's more understanding than anything else. He doesn't say anything else about it, and Tony is glad he doesn't.

"We will have to decide where to live eventually," Loki says, sounding warm and unworried, "but not today. We have time. I do wish to show you Asgard one day, though, and the other realms as well. I saw them when I was a child and would like to return with you by my side."

"Other realms?" Tony echoes, stunned. "Like, uh. Elves?"

"Yes." Loki comes to stand behind Tony again and wraps his hand around him, just like he did yesterday. His lips brush Tony's neck. "But for now I am content staying here in Midgard. I know you have duties here, and they seem important to you. I am not needed in Asgard as much as you are needed here."

"But you're a prince."

Loki snorts softly. "A prince who barely even managed to leave his bedroom in the last decades. Believe me, I am impressively useless."

It hits Tony again, how unhappy Loki must have been. He doesn't *feel* unhappy right now, but there's something - a hint of bitterness, maybe, hidden away so deep in Loki's chest that he can easily cover it up with lightness and self-irony. It's remarkably familiar, and Tony hates it.

"Not anymore," he says.

"Hm?"

"I don't even know if you ever were useless, honestly," Tony continues. He is slowly forming a pile of edible looking pancakes next to the pan. "What you did with the sigils yesterday? Total opposite of useless. Which reminds me, I've completely forgotten about Doom. Again. *That* is useless, and I don't think Fury cares about our needed bonding time, he'll rip my head off."

Loki's arms around him tighten. "No, he will not."

"I didn't mean that literally," Tony informs him. "Relax. My point is that you're definitely not useless anymore thanks to yours truly, because you can filter out stuff now, which means you won't zone out and can do all the amazing things you've been wanting to do but couldn't because being an unbonded Sentinel sucks big time. So what's on your bucket list?"

"You talk very fast," Loki murmurs against Tony's neck.

"Oh. Yeah, sorry."

"No, it's very comfortable."

"Really?"

"Yes. My brain was made to process a lot of information at once. It's rare that I don't get bored during conversations."

Tony stills. "So you mean I could ramble at you really fast and chaotically and you'd *enjoy* it?"

"Yes."

"Amazing. Fantastic. Spectacular. Can I keep you?"

"Naturally. Your pancake is burning."

"Oh, shit."

It's when they finally sit down at the kitchen table that Tony realizes that Loki didn't answer the question. He watches as Loki takes his fork and prods the pancake on his plate, fascinated. Tony isn't sure if that's ridiculous or adorable, but he's leaning toward adorable.

"So," he says, smiling, "what *is* on your bucket list?"

"I have never heard that term before today." Loki reaches for the bottle of maple syrup Tony placed on the table and frowns at it. "What is this? It smells nice."

"Maple syrup," Tony says. "It goes on the pancakes. And a bucket list is just a list of stuff you want to do. Realm hopping is on that list, I guess, what else?"

Loki pauses, the syrup still in his hand. "I'm afraid I'm not used to making plans. You could say that so far, all items on my *bucket list* have been directly connected to staying in my rooms and being left alone by other people in order to live an at least sort of long and peaceful life." He squeezes a bit of syrup onto his fingertip and sucks it off, immediately wrinkling his nose. "Gods, this is sweet."

Tony tries not to be too distracted by the sight of Loki sucking his finger into his mouth, but that is remarkably difficult. Not staring at the tip of Loki's tongue when it darts out to lick his lips is downright impossible. Tony is almost surprised to feel the almost magnetic pull that's been drawing him to Loki since he first saw him mix with arousal, with *desire*, but maybe he shouldn't be. He hasn't been attracted to a man in a while, but it's hardly an entirely new experience, and with Loki it's like - well, Tony wants to know him inside out, and for Loki to know him inside out as well. Sexual attraction is a symptom of that, it seems.

"I'm not sure what you are thinking about," Loki says, idly cutting his pancake into bite-size pieces, "but if you keep thinking about it, we may not be able to finish eating."

Tony stares at him. "What?"

"You're projecting." There's a teasing spark in Loki's eyes when he looks at Tony, but his tone is mostly fond. "Unconsciously, I think."

Tony stares some more, because at first he's not sure what Loki is talking about. But then he feels it - thinks he can feel it, anyway, although not in a physical way. He feels it just like he can tell stuff about Loki's state of mind, only that that is still some sort of deliberate decision; he can just think about probing and suddenly there's this echo of Loki's current emotions again. The other way around, though? Yeah, Tony still doesn't know how he does that, or why it happens without his permission, but he can feel the echo of *his* emotions in Loki's now, can feel it trickle through the soft warm *something* that's probably their bond.

That's what "projecting" feels like, then. Tony rubs his chest, unsure how to stop it. "Sorry. I, uh."

"Oh, I don't mind," Loki assures him, trying a first bite of pancake. He's eating it bland now and seems to be briefly distracted by the taste before he says, "I'm flattered. And I already told you that I like having you close."

Tony snorts. "This... empathy stuff, it's so close that it borders on invasive."

Loki pauses, looking at Tony thoughtfully. "I suppose. I'm not used to it, either, but I can't say that I don't like it."

Tony can't say that, either. He'd be scared of Loki judging him, but he knows that he doesn't have to. All he can feel when he takes a look at Loki's side of the bond is acceptance. Horrifyingly, it makes Tony's throat go tight.

"How do I stop it, though?" he asks, relieved when he doesn't sound like he's about to have a hysterical breakdown. Which is just entirely pointless, because judging by the way Loki looks at him, he can tell that there's a minor hysterical breakdown going on. Tony guesses that he has the bond to thank for that.

To his credit, Loki doesn't call him out. Oh, he's alarmed enough, Tony can tell; he's sure that Loki is already on the brink of pulling Tony into his lap to hold him until everybody's calmed down. But he doesn't do that. Instead, he says, "As far as I know, Guides are told to try to visualize it. Jane tends to imagine it as the Bifrost and herself as Heimdall, which Thor finds absolutely hilarious every time she mentions it."

His long-suffering tone makes Tony smile, and imagining Jane in the place of the sheer mountain of a god Tony met exactly once makes him grin. "Metaphors, huh?"

"Yes. Although distraction seems to work just as well."

Tony realizes that Loki is right; he's keeping his emotions to himself again. He huffs and finally starts eating his own pancake. "This stuff makes no sense. Fair warning: soon I'm gonna bury myself in my workshop for days and figure out how *everything* works, and there's nothing you can do about it."

“I look forward to seeing you work,” Loki says. “According to my brother your craftsmanship is unparalleled in Midgard.”

“Yeah, sure is,” Tony says, snorting. “Still, you’ll hate being in the workshop while I work.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because it’s a mess. It’s loud, and Dum-E mixes smoothies that smell like unwashed socks, and I’m unresponsive and inconsiderate and altogether awful to be around when I’m working.”

Loki looks at him curiously. “Was that a quote?”

“Actually, yeah. A more or less direct one.” Tony hesitates, because he’s not sure if the whole freaking out because of other people shtick extends to mere conversations, too. He decides to give it a go. “I gave Pepper - my ex PA and current CEO of my company, she’s awesome but very uncomprehending in the face of disorganized genius. Anyway, I gave her access to my shop and she only came down there when she absolutely had to because I needed to sign some papers and wouldn’t come upstairs.”

Loki doesn’t freak out at the mention of someone else, thankfully, but there’s still something like annoyance scurrying over his face when he says, “Well, I still look forward to seeing you work.”

He sounds defiant, as if he’s expecting Tony to disagree. Tony has to smile. “Okay. I can show you the workshop when we’re done here. You saw it already, but I feel like you were a bit distracted by... you know. Me.”

Loki doesn’t try to deny it, he just nods. He’s already finished his first pancake and now gets up to get a second one. “I’ve been meaning to ask you to show me around, anyway. Not knowing this house is somewhat uncomfortable for me.”

“Oh. Sorry?”

“It’s not your fault,” Loki replies, smirking a little as he sits down again. “Sentinels can get a little... territorial.”

Tony arches a brow. “What, like a dog?”

Loki looks at him.

“Wait, do you have dogs in Asgard? Do you know what a dog is?”

“I know what a dog is,” Loki says, unamused. “I think I should be insulted by being compared to one.”

“Hey,” Tony says, pointing at Loki with his fork, “I’m a cat person, but dogs are amazing. And if you don’t want to be compared to a dog, don’t say you’re ‘territorial’.”

“I said that *Sentinels* can -”

“Yeah, and you are a Sentinel.” Tony grins. “And my house is gonna be your territory for the foreseeable future, so you’re basically my watchdog now.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Loki tells him, primly, and Tony laughs. With his mouth full.

*

After breakfast - yes, it was definitely breakfast, even though it’s like 10pm since they fell asleep around noon - they take a tour of the house, and Loki acts exactly like he did in the kitchen: he looks at every corner of every room, touches everything he can get his hands on without a lot of effort, and opens a lot of doors and boxes. Tony is surprised that Loki finds so much stuff to inspect - he always thought that his house is pretty minimalistic, and apart from that he basically just lives in his workshop, the kitchen and his bed- and bathroom while ignoring the rest of the house, but as it turns out even that doesn’t save one from owning clutter.

He follows Loki around everywhere he goes, and he doesn’t make any more dog jokes, which he definitely deserves an award for, because a few times he’s sure that he just saw Loki sniff at something very subtly.

They end up in the workshop again, and after fifteen minutes of Loki walking around and looking at stuff, Tony sits down on the ground - chairs are for people who can sit on them orderly, and he is not one of them - and works a bit. He's got about a million missed calls and unread messages, most of them by Fury who not so politely inquires what the fuck Tony is thinking eloping with an alien instead of helping the team. Tony sends a not so polite message back and tells Fury to fuck off. He also replies to Pepper's, Rhodey's and the team's worried messages and assures them that they're fine, and sends a quick thanks to Jane who wants them both to speak up if they need anything at all. Then Tony decides that he's had more than enough social interaction for the day.

He leaves JARVIS on mute and pulls up the first designs of yet another suit upgrade he’s been working on. Dividing his attention between that and Loki is surprisingly easy; usually Tony can’t stand any sort of distraction when he’s working. Hell, most of the time he can’t stand having another person in the workshop, with very few (three) exceptions. Having Loki in the room with him is alright, though.

Eventually, Dum-E and U go from observing Loki to actually approaching him, and Tony immediately thinks that watching Loki interact with the bots is going to be his favorite thing to do very soon. He’s careful with them, but not annoyed or weirded out. He even introduces himself to them, all formal and adorable, and Tony is so smitten that it’s embarrassing. Possibly also a little bit jealous, and that’s even more embarrassing, because *really*, he should be able to deal with Loki’s attention not being on him for a bit. And he can deal with it. No problem.

He lasts twenty minutes.

“Hey, Loki.”

Loki turns to him immediately, giving each of the bots a last pet on the head before he walks over to Tony, already smiling. For a second, Tony thinks about showing Loki his designs, but then he makes the holograms disappear with a flick of his wrists; he'd doesn't even want to share Loki's attention with his own work right now.

"I think I'm being a bit territorial, too," he says, not at all sure if that's a good thing. He's already a lot to deal with when his hormones aren't going haywire because he's *bonding* with his *literal* soulmate; this is probably going to cross a line sooner or later.

For now Loki just looks faintly amused, though. "Oh?"

Tony doesn't elaborate, because he's already on the verge of blushing as it is. "Let's go upstairs and watch a movie or something."

On the sofa. Where - wow, what a coincidence - it'll be pretty comfortable for them to sit close to each other. And maybe cuddle a bit. Tony's chest is aching again.

"Could we watch it here?"

“Uh,” Tony says, surprised. “Yeah, sure? It’s more comfortable upstairs, though.”

“I am comfortable here.” Loki sounds almost apologetic, and after a second he frowns slightly. “But if you prefer going -”

“No, it’s alright,” Tony hurries to say and gets up on his feet. “The workshop’s my favorite place to be, anyway.”

“I know.”

“Huh?”

Loki lifts his shoulders, gaze flickering away for a moment. “Everything here smells like you.”

“Huh,” Tony says again. “Like - comfortable me?”

“Yes.”

“And the rest of the house doesn’t.”

“Not like this, no.” Loki takes a step forward and puts his hands on Tony’s hips, as if he can’t help himself. He even buries his face in Tony’s neck, although the position must be uncomfortable for him given how tall he is. “I can tell that you don’t sleep in the bed upstairs as often as you should, and that you use the kitchen only rarely. I assume you don’t live here the whole time.”

Tony chuckles. The closeness makes him a bit dizzy, but he does manage to wonder if he should worry about how good Loki's senses are. People get tired of him quickly already with normal - that is, human - senses. "You remember the tower you landed on? The Avengers Tower?"

"Of course."

"Yeah, it started off as Stark Tower. I've got another workshop there, and a penthouse to sleep and eat and shower in."

"I see." Loki pulled back and looked at him, thoughtful. "Would you rather stay there than here?"

Tony raises a brow. "There are hundreds of people working in the tower. We wouldn't be actually alone."

Loki thinks about it for a moment. "Then I would rather stay here," he says then, decidedly.

"Yeah, thought so. Uh, there's a sofa somewhere over there, but I think it's hidden under stuff."

So they free the sofa from said stuff so that they can make themselves comfortable on them, and Tony pulls up a holographic screen, which means that the random movie he's chosen is a little blue-tinted. Not that it matters, since Loki doesn't really watch the movie, anyway. He has plastered himself against Tony's side, with his face buried against his shoulder, and seems to have decided that nuzzling Tony's neck is more entertaining than - well, whatever they are watching.

Tony doesn't pay attention, either.

"You like doing that," he says, inclining his head when Loki's nose reaches a spot right below Tony's ear. Tony didn't know that but apparently he's a bit ticklish there; he still tilts his head to the side to give Loki better access.

Loki mutters something utterly incomprehensible.

"Lokes, I don't know Godspak."

Loki presses a smile against Tony's skin. "You're starting to smell bonded."

He sounds so genuinely happy that Tony breaks into a grin, although he isn't sure if he knows what Loki means. "Bonded?"

"Yes. You smell like me, but also - well, bonded Guides smell different. It's very..." He says something else in Godspak, and then he finally settles on, "Nice."

Tony has to laugh. "Nice, huh?"

"It's an understatement." Loki brushes his lips along Tony's jaw. "Everybody in Asgard could tell that we're together just by being in the same building as you."

“And you like that.”

“Naturally,” Loki says, and after a pause he adds, “We are possessive by nature. I hope it doesn't bother you too much.”

By we he probably means himself and other Sentinels, although it's possible that he's including Tony, too. Hell, he should include Tony, because Tony himself thinks that right now he'd snap at anyone who even looks at Loki the wrong way. Or looks at Loki, full stop.

"It doesn't bother me," Tony says. "I like it, actually, although I probably shouldn't."

"There is no reason why you shouldn't." Loki leans his head against the backrest, looking at Tony pensively. "I promise not to let it get out of hand, and if I break my promise, you have my explicit permission to do whatever it takes to knock some sense into my head."

Tony smiles at Loki's humorous tone, but the words themselves are a bit worrying. "Sounds like this sort of thing often *gets out of hand*."

Loki shrugs, making it look more elegant than should be physically possible. "I've met Sentinels who never let their Guides out of their sight, who don't let them do anything without permission, who treat them more like property than a partner and don't care much what the Guide thinks about it."

"That's not possessiveness," Tony says. "That's abuse."

"Yes," Loki agrees.

"And there's nothing people do about that? I mean, when you meet a couple like that, you don't - I don't know, separate them?"

"A bonded couple cannot be separated," Loki says slowly, seriously. "Not for good. Some may manage to be apart for a few weeks or even months, but permanently... Well, it's not good for their mental health, to say the least." He doesn't sound all too happy about it, an impression that gets stronger when he continues, "A bond can be both blessing and curse."

It upsets him, thinking and talking about this. Like before, Tony feels that in his own chest, and he instinctively squeezes an arm between Loki's head and the backrest to put it around his shoulders, the grip of his hand tight on Loki's upper arm. Loki melts right into it.

"Just for the record," Tony says, "if you're ever an asshole to me, I'm gonna be an asshole right back. I don't take well to being bossed around."

Loki chuckles. "Yes, I figured. And I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Glad we're on the same page, then."

Loki just hums. He's already distracted by Tony's neck again, breathing him in. He also puts his hand on Tony's thigh, a little too high up to be strictly casual. Or platonic. Then again, Tony isn't sure if anything they're doing here is *meant* to be platonic.

Actually.

"Loki?"

"Mh hm."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

"How does..." Yeah, how to say this without sounding like an insecure lunatic? "Uh, how do people do this, usually?"

"I have never watched a movie before, so I wouldn't know."

"Okay, first of all, we're not even trying to watch the movie, and secondly, that's not what I'm talking about and you know it."

"Oh, do I? Your question really was rather vague."

Tony huffs in reaction to the teasing tone, but otherwise chooses to ignore it. "What I mean is - you said this is like *soulmates*, right? So does that mean all, uh, bonded couples are... I don't know. Automatically married?"

"Oh," Loki says, understanding. "No. Well, I do know a lot of mates who *are* married, but in the end, marriage is still a concept that is independent from bonding. Not all mates are romantically or sexually involved, and neither is in any way a requirement. Does that answer your very vague question?"

"I think so?"

Loki rests his head on Tony's shoulder, looking at the screen for probably the first time. "I do not expect anything in that regard from you, if that is what you're worrying about. But I don't think I have to tell you that I am... not opposed. Or do I?"

Tony also stares at the screen, without seeing anything. He's thinking about breakfast, about wanting so badly that he could have climbed over the table and right into his lap, and about Loki's answering satisfaction. Loki likes being wanted, and he isn't above wanting in return.

"No," Tony says, feeling strangely uncertain. It's like he knows more about Loki than he should, more than what Loki has told him so far, and he isn't sure what he feels about that. "I mean - I know."

"You're not opposed, either."

It's not a question, and Tony thinks that maybe, knowing more about each other than they should is what this whole thing is about.

"No," he says, "I'm not."

Loki doesn't say anything. He's giddy, though, and the echo of it makes Tony smile. He stays quiet as well and thinks about everything Loki said, about not having touched anyone in eighty years, about being useless and stuck in his rooms his entire life, and - finally - about being happy now. *Happy*. Just because he's met Tony after centuries of waiting for him. That's almost too much to grasp, and Tony doesn't try to make sense of it right now. Instead he wonders if Loki is listening to Tony's heartbeat right now, too.

He puts his hand on Loki's and entwines their fingers.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Loki does not want to go outside. There are *people* outside. Fine, maybe they are far away, but it's very likely that he will be able to smell them as soon as he leaves the comfortable cocoon that Anthony's house has become by now, and that will already be bad enough.

Next to him, Anthony seems to be getting a little impatient. "Loki?"

"Yes?" Loki says without turning around. He prefers to keep glaring at the still closed front door.

"Are we leaving the house at some point this week?"

"Probably."

"Okay," Anthony says and puts his arm around Loki, squeezing his shoulder. "Great. Do you want to continue thinking about it here or can we go somewhere more comfortable? Back to bed, for example?"

"You said you wanted to go to the beach."

"That's right, I did say that, and I do want to go to the beach, but honey, we've been standing here for like twenty minutes."

Honey. Loki learned a lot of things in the last two weeks. He learned that Anthony is not an overly friendly man, at least not judging by appearance and behaviour; he is quick and brash and calculating, and at times he is gruff, impatient and offensive. Oh, he can also be charming, yes, and he likes to tease and joke and laugh, but while all of that seems to fit Loki perfectly, he can imagine that most other people don't really know what to make of Anthony, how to handle him. Anthony is not friendly like Thor is friendly. He is friendly in silence and secrecy; he observes and finds things that require fixing, and after fixing them he does not ask for thanks. He treats Loki like that, too, makes sure that he has everything he needs without even letting Loki notice that he's being taken care of, and he frowns and shrugs when Loki thanks him.

Anthony isn't friendly, but he is kind, and he cares so very much. And now that he's started calling Loki things like *honey* and *sweetheart*, Loki can't help but think that Anthony is also very sweet.

"Honestly, I don't mean to pressure you or anything, but this is really boring."

Most of the time, at least.

Loki sighs. "You're safe here."

"I'll be safe down at the beach, too," Anthony tells him. "The beach is practically our backyard. Nothing bad ever happens to people in their backyards." He pauses. "I feel like statistics might not agree with me on that, but still. My point is, if I don't see the sun anytime soon, I'll suffer from serious vitamin D deficiency."

Loki frowns and turns his head so that he can smell at Anthony's hand that is still on Loki's shoulder. "You smell healthy to me. Mostly."

"Okay, first of all," Anthony says, "can you really *smell* if someone's healthy or not? Secondly, what the fuck does 'mostly' mean?"

"To an extent, yes, I can," Loki tells him patiently; he is used to Anthony asking all sorts of questions about what Loki can and cannot do. They are rarer now that Anthony knows pretty much everything about Loki there is to know, but now and then Anthony still stumbles over things that baffle him. "Sickness smells rotten. But in your case, 'mostly' only means that you aren't young anymore."

"Wow," Anthony says, his tone dry and offended. He doesn't take his hand away from Loki's shoulder. "Did you just call me old?"

"Please, it's hardly a secret that you aren't five anymore."

Anthony's lips twitch into a smirk. "You say that like five is a desirable age to be."

"Is it not?"

"Five is preschool age. I'm talking tiny humans who refuse to take naps and fight a lot with other tiny humans about stuff like whose turn it is to play with a stuffie that carries more germs than a rest stop toilet."

"Ah," Loki says. Sometimes he is still confused by how quickly humans age, and by how long they remain children despite the shortness of their lives. "Well, then I have to retract my earlier statement. It's possible that you are still five, considering how often you refuse to take naps and - Anthony."

"Yes, dear?"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm opening the door," Anthony says, and manages to push it open all the way just as Loki wraps his arm around Anthony's middle and pulls him tightly against his side.

He's not even surprised, really. But that doesn't mean that this makes him comfortable. "*Why* would you do that?"

Anthony sighs, wriggles out of Loki's grip and reaches up to cup Loki's face and stop him from glaring at the absolute horror that is the outside world. "Listen up, sweetcheeks," Anthony says, "I know you don't want to go outside. I know you want to stay here forever and have everything we need delivered because it makes you feel like nobody's going to take me away from you ever, and I know you can't help it because it's instincts and the bond and

all that. But I also know that you know that you're being irrational, and while I have nothing against cuddling in bed or sciencing in the shop all day every day, we'll have to leave this bubble of ours eventually or we'll both go insane. Are you with me?"

"Yes," Loki says, "of course. But -"

"Great. So, I'm telling you now that nobody's going to take me away from you ever, because I'll annihilate everyone who even thinks about trying. Clear?"

Loki has to smile. A little bit. "Crystal clear, yes. But maybe we could try the terrace first -"

"Loki," Anthony says again, patting Loki's cheek, "sometimes you just have to run before you can walk, okay? Let's go to the beach."

With that, he takes Loki's hand and drags him outside, and Loki clings to Anthony's hand as if it is the only thing keeping him alive. In a way, that's not even an understatement; while they were still inside and Anthony was so close to him, ignoring the smells and sounds outside was easy enough, but now the feeling of Anthony's hand in his is a shield that protects Loki from more input than he is used to. It's not like there is all too much to hear and smell and sense, given how remote Anthony's - their - house is, but the input itself is not the actual problem at all.

The problem is that Loki does not like leaving his territory. Their bond is still new and that makes them *vulnerable* in a way he doesn't even want to think about. In Asgard, a newly bonded couple isn't expected to leave their house for at least a month or two, although Loki *has* seen couples who were out and about again just a few days after meeting each other. And fine, Loki doesn't feel like getting even remotely close to other people anytime soon, but a short trip to the beach? That should be possible.

It *is* practically their backyard, after all.

There is an elegant staircase leading down the cliffs to the beach, and Loki spends the entire way down clinging to Anthony's hand and trying to see and hear nothing else. Anthony makes it easy for him, rambling about how he designed this house and holding Loki's hand so firmly that it almost hurts. Focusing on him makes everything else easier; it turns the clamor of the waves and wind into soft background noise and the stench of the sea into quite the pleasant smell.

"Okay?" Anthony asks when they arrive at the end of the stairs. "Or do you want to go back inside?"

It's tempting. Dragging Anthony up the stairs, back into the house and then into bed where Loki could wrap himself around him and ignore the rest of the world like they have been doing the past week would be *nice*, and it would be easy. But well, Loki isn't sure if he is *fond* of easy, and it's very obvious that Anthony is not.

"No," Loki says. "I'm fine. Are these waters dangerous?"

Anthony, who is taking off his shoes for some unfathomable reason, gives him an odd look and a raised brow. "Well, define 'dangerous'."

"In Asgard, there are creatures in the sea that can swallow people whole. They usually don't spit them out again."

"Oh, cool," Anthony says. "Actual sea monsters, huh? We get the occasional shark here, but all in all it's as safe as any other beach. We can go for a swim if you want. Take off your shoes."

Loki frowns down at his boots. "Why?"

"Because only lunatics don't take off their shoes on the beach," Anthony informs him. "Also I think your weird Sentinel nerve endings will enjoy the sand."

"My nerve endings are not *weird*," Loki protests, but he still bends down to take off his boots. He puts them next to Anthony's sneakers and then rolls up his pants, solely because Anthony did that, too.

"You're adorable," Anthony says.

"No."

"Yes." Anthony grabs Loki's hand again and pulls him onto the sand. "C'mon, I haven't been down here in ages."

Loki lets himself be dragged along and listens with one ear as Anthony points at this and that and talks and talks and talks, which is nice because Loki loves listening to him, but he also needs to pay attention to the feeling of sand under his bare feet. Because of course Anthony is right - Loki's nerve endings do like this. He is so used to covering his skin up from neck to toe to minimize the sensations that he tends to forget that this is an option now, that he can curl his toes into warm sand without the feeling taking up so much space in his brain that he can't think about anything else. It makes him hold Anthony's hand more tightly; he needs the contact as a counterweight.

"Are you listening?"

"Yes," Loki says, yanking his eyes away from the ground to look at Anthony.

"Really?" Anthony sounds amused. "It looked like the sand stole your attention."

"I can concentrate on several things at once now," Loki says, and smiles. "You were saying that we should try surfing and that you haven't done it since you were young. I don't know what surfing is."

"God, I love your brain." Grinning, Tony tugs at Loki's hand to pull him closer to the water. "Basically it's getting on a board and trying not to fall off."

"In the water, I assume."

"Yeah, in the water."

"Hm." Loki lifts his hand to shield his eyes from the sunlight, gaze wandering over the ocean. "I'm afraid I can't swim."

Anthony stares at him. "Seriously? A thousand years in this universe and you never learned how to swim?"

Loki arches a brow.

"Right," Anthony says, slowly. "You didn't leave your room a lot. Uh - I'll teach you, then. If you want."

Loki nods and looks down at his feet again. The sand is soft and slightly wet under his skin, and they are so close to the water now that he can taste salt on his tongue. The wind brings countless different smells to him. He knows that before he met Anthony, all these sensations would have been too much for him to bear, that he would have gotten lost in them, but now he simply feels - anchored. Like he is finally standing on solid ground instead of desperately clinging to an edge with the constant risk of falling like he has been his entire life.

Anthony squeezes his hand and bumps Loki's shoulder with his own. "I knew you'd like it here."

"I admit it's nice to be outside for a change." Loki crouches and examines the sand, watching as a wave stops only inches away from his toes and swooshes back again. He crouches and picks up a tiny seashell, smiling. "We don't have beaches like this in Asgard. Ours are much more... stony."

"At least you've been to those beaches, then."

"When I was young, yes. I was already very sensitive as a child, but I could manage going on trips just fine. The problems started shortly before I came of age, that is when most Sentinels start presenting as such."

"Guides, too?" Anthony asks. He makes no move to let go of Loki's hand; maybe he knows that Loki might get overwhelmed if he did.

"Yes, Guides as well," Loki says and carefully buries his fingers in the dry sand, sucking in a soft breath. "Oh, that's very nice."

"Is it? What does it feel like?"

"Sand. Obviously."

"Yeah, but -"

"It's just sand," Loki says with a smile, shaking his head. "It doesn't feel different to me than it does to you, but it... it's able to occupy a bigger part of my mind, and it may tell me more than you, but still. Guides usually present a little earlier than Sentinels, but only by a few decades - here, one or two years earlier, I'd say."

“Can’t say I really noticed it,” Anthony says. He doesn’t seem bewildered by the change of topic - of course not, he should be used to the jumps Loki’s brain makes by now. Anthony’s own brain works the same way, after all.

“You would have, if you - or anyone in your life, for that matter - had known what Guides even were.” Loki stands up again, wiping his hand on his pants. He feels like the the one thing he won’t like about the beach is that for some reason the sand is already getting *everywhere*. “You probably were a lonely child. Charming, but without a lot of friends. You already understood people better than a child can handle, and most children your age found you strange.” Loki pauses. “My parents thought I would be a Guide at first, because I enjoyed being alone. Young Sentinels usually like being in the center of attention, they are loud and confident and, frankly, quite annoying. My brother was exactly like that.”

Anthony pulls at Loki’s hand a little, leading him forward. They wait for the next wave, and Loki chuckles when it reaches his feet, cold and cleansing. It’s quite the funny feeling.

“I didn’t have *any* friends,” Anthony says suddenly. “Not until I was like, fifteen. That’s when I went to college, and at first I only had one friend - the only real one, I guess. Then people started swarming around me like mosquitos. They couldn’t get enough of me. I always thought it was because of - you know. The money.”

“Mosquitos?”

“Little flying insects that suck your blood.”

“How charming.” Loki thinks about that for a moment. “The money probably played into it, too, but I am certain you would have become very popular even if you had been born poor. Guides always draw people in, and you are a very strong one.”

“Am I?”

“Of course. If you weren’t, you wouldn’t be mine.”

Anthony snorts. “I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or just arrogance.”

Loki gives him a sharp smile. “I once knew that old enemies of Asgard wanted to break into our vault hours before they actually tried to do it. It is not arrogance.”

“Okay,” Anthony says, smiling back at him. “How did you know that, though?”

“I simply did.” Loki closes his eyes and takes a breath through his nose. After a few seconds, he points to their right. “There are two people walking on the beach, a few miles from here. It’s just a murmur, but I can hear them talking. A man and a woman. The man had a light cold a few days ago, and she is either hungry or aroused.” He cocks his head to the side. “Hungry, I think. It’s difficult to tell from the distance, the smells are similar.”

“Now you’re just showing off.”

Loki opens his eyes again and grins. “I’m afraid I can’t help it. It’s an old habit; Thor is not nearly as good at it and needed to be taught that lesson many, many times.”

Anthony laughs. The sound makes Loki's heart flutter, and it's not an entirely pleasant feeling. Before he knows it he's already pulled Anthony close, resting his chin on his Guide's shoulder. Yes, that's much better.

Anthony runs a hand over Loki's back. "You're scared," he says, his voice quiet and careful. "Of what?"

"Losing you," Loki replies just as quietly.

Anthony hums. He is getting better and better at using their bond, by now he notices almost immediately when Loki's emotions change in a way that demands attention. For someone who wasn't even aware of his skills until recently, Anthony already uses them expertly - like Loki said, he is a very strong guide. He shows it again now, although Loki only notices that after a minute or two, when he has already relaxed again because Anthony is right here, they've found each other, they will be together from now on.

Loki opens his eyes and looks over Anthony's shoulder at the waves. "Anthony?"

There is a pause before Anthony answers. "Yeah?"

"Did you calm me down just now?"

"Uh," Anthony says. "Maybe?"

"Deliberately?"

"Maybe?"

Loki pulls back to look at him, his hands on Anthony's shoulders. Anthony looks almost guilty.

"I don't like it when you're scared, okay?" he says. "Especially not when it's pointless, because it's not like I'm going anywhere. But it was just a nudge, I swear. I didn't even think it would actually work."

"Oh, it did work."

"I'm sorry."

Loki blinks at him. "Why are you sorry?"

"Well, messing with your feelings is not actually - I don't know, it's wrong somehow, isn't it? I've been manipulated enough times in my life, it's not *nice*."

Loki looks at him for a moment, then he shakes his head. "You are not manipulating me. You are helping me think. That's a very important difference."

"Uh," Anthony says, again. "Yes. No. I can literally *alter* your feelings. That's what I just did, isn't it? Oh my god. That's what I just did."

“You’re getting upset,” Loki informs him, frowning. “I don’t like it. Stop.”

“Stop,” Anthony echoes. He huffs a laugh. “Yes, right. I’ll stop. I’m stopping. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.”

“Stop telling me what to do. I’ll freak out if you keep that up. You won’t like me when I’m freaking out.”

“I just meant -”

“I know what you meant,” Anthony says, sharply. His shoulders are tense under Loki’s hands.

Loki arches a brow at him, and Anthony frowns. Loki feels deeply uncomfortable, and there are *things* in the water - probably just small fish, but their presence bothers him immensely right now, because he wants to be alone with Anthony and they are outside and Loki has forgotten how complicated being outside is for him. Wait, not forgotten - he has just already gotten used to Anthony grounding him, it seems, and now that Anthony is upset himself, well.

Loki takes Anthony’s hand and drags him out of the shallow water. Anthony goes with him without any protest.

“Loki?”

“Yes.”

“Are we fighting now? We haven’t fought before. Do mated couples fight?”

“Of course they do,” Loki says. “But no, we are not. This is just a small squabble.”

“Right. Okay. Sure.”

Out of the water, Loki already feels a little better. That might also be because Anthony is holding his hand, apparently not planning on letting go anytime soon. They just stand there at first, Loki wondering if Anthony feels just as idiotic as Loki himself, then Anthony tugs at Loki’s hand and sits down in the sand. Loki carefully follows suit, sitting down cross-legged next to him.

It’s silent for a few minutes. Loki feels Anthony’s agitation as if it is his own, but he doubts that Anthony is sharing it on purpose. After some time, the fear starts to recede, and Anthony’s breathing evens out.

“Okay,” he says finally. “I’m fine.”

“Yes?”

“Yeah.”

Loki lets go of Anthony's hand, but only to put his arm around his shoulders. He lets out a relieved breath himself. Anthony is still projecting, but now it's only slight awkwardness, a hint of shame. It makes Loki's face flush - he's not often embarrassed, but it always makes him blush. Ridiculous, given that the embarrassment isn't even his right now, but well, that is a part of being bonded.

"You could, of course," Loki murmurs, watching Anthony closely.

Anthony glances at him. "Huh?"

"Manipulate me," Loki says. "If you did it cleverly and subtly, which I believe you would, and if you used my instincts against me -" He lifts a shoulder. "It's very likely that you could make me do anything you wanted. Sentinels like to act like they are the leader in all their relationships, but in the end they'll all right out of their Guide's hand."

Anthony doesn't look at him, he is staring at the ocean, his expression thoughtful and slightly grim. Eventually, he says, "But I have instincts, too."

"Yes."

"I want you to be happy," Anthony says, "and safe. I want to be with you. I think I would do a lot of things to keep you. So if you used that against me -"

"I see we understand each other."

Anthony sighs. He still doesn't seem all too happy. Loki starts drawing circles on Anthony's shoulder; the thing he wants the most right now is for Anthony to stop being scared.

"We both have a lot of power over each other," he says carefully. "But if we use it well - and I will try my best to do so, although I can't promise that I won't make any mistakes - we will be... good for each other. I can't put into words how much better I feel now that I am with you."

Loki can hear the almost silent sound it makes when Anthony swallows. "Yeah. I know. And same. But Loki -"

"Yes?"

"You'll get tired of me eventually," Anthony says, as if that is a fact. "You will. That's just what happens."

It is a fact for him, Loki thinks. An unwritten law of the universe, an inevitable development. If Loki ever meets someone who got *tired* of Anthony, he will probably have to kill them.

"To others, maybe," he says as softly as he can. "Not to me."

"You can't promise that."

"I can and I do."

Anthony huffs, gaze skittering away. "You'll make me want to keep you even more, saying things like that."

Loki smiles. He takes his arm away from Anthony's shoulders to take his hand again. "Good."

"Is it?"

"Definitely."

Anthony turns his head to look at him, smiling with his eyes more than with his mouth. Gods, Loki does like looking at him, already couldn't get his fill in the start, before they even really knew each other. Loki knows him now - not nearly well enough to be satisfied, but enough to be doubtlessly certain that the Norns were correct when they considered both of their life threads and thought they would look better entangled.

Anthony swallows again. Loki gets the very fleeting impression that his Guide wants to do something, or say something, and is about to inquire as to what it is when Anthony kisses him.

Loki doesn't move. He can't. Anthony lips are warm, the pressure against Loki's own firm but gentle, and it's like Loki's brain celebrates its retirement with a last big firework before it shuts down for good.

Anthony pulls away, his own eyes wide. His gaze flickers over Loki's face, worried. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," Loki says automatically, surprised that he can speak at all. His voice is rough.

"Okay," Anthony says very slowly. There's a spike of anxiety travelling toward Loki through their bond. "If you, uh. If you want to forget that ever happened, we can -"

Loki shakes his head quickly and decisively. He is grabbing Anthony's arm now, fingers digging into his skin. "I've never -" he starts, but his voice breaks. He clears his throat. "Never before."

Anthony blinks once, twice. Then he says, "Oh. Right. The touching problem."

"The touching problem," Loki confirms. It's been a problem as long as he can remember; touching anyone or being touched by anyone has always been a pain, the thought of kissing someone or even taking them to bed - no. It wouldn't have been possible.

With Anthony, of course, it's different. Touching him isn't a pain, it's a necessity.

"I didn't realize," Anthony mumbles. "Was that - alright, though? Or -"

"Yes," Loki says. He's never felt this warm before. "A little - overwhelming, maybe. It will get easier to handle with practice, I'm sure."

Anthony laughs, brief and slightly hysterical. "Practice, huh."

"Yes," Loki says and leans in, first pressing his lips against Anthony's skin - something he has done many times by now but still can't get enough of - and then rubbing his nose against Anthony's cheek, breathing him in. He smells so much like Loki at this point that it drives Loki insane in the best of ways. "Yes. Please."

Anthony's hand slides up Loki's arm, his neck, and finally cups his face, causing Loki to pull back a little. Anthony's thumb brushes against Loki's lower lip and this time, Loki is prepared - well, as prepared as he can be, really. Thankfully, Anthony knows how this sort of thing works by now, that Loki sometimes needs a while to adjust to certain sensations because otherwise they get too much to bear. He kisses Loki again just as gently as before, his other hand coming up to the other side of Loki's face. It lasts long enough that Loki can concentrate on how it *feels*. Mostly just warm and intimate, not intrinsically different from kissing Anthony's cheek or forehead, but - yes, but. The implications are clear enough, and Loki shivers and kisses back.

He can feel Anthony's lips form a smile that quickly changes into a gasp when Loki presses even closer, wrapping one arm around Anthony's waist to hold him tight. Anthony isn't bothered by the way Loki kisses him, urgent and demanding now, actually Loki can feel very clearly that Anthony is overjoyed, but maybe a part of that is also Loki himself. All of a sudden, it's hard to tell where his feelings end and Anthony's begin.

It's Anthony who breaks the kiss, the grip of his hand tight on Loki's arm. "Shit," he says, breathless and flushed. "Shit."

Loki looks at him, amused. "It was only my second try. There's no need to be crude if you didn't like it."

"Oh, shut up," Anthony says, laughing, because apparently putting on a mask, even to make a joke, is entirely pointless at the moment. "You know that's not it. I can -"

He lets out a shuddering breath. His eyes are dark, pupils blown wide, he looks like he's having the biggest epiphany. Loki can still taste him. He wants it again, though, so he covers Anthony's mouth with his once more, just for a moment. A hopelessly needy sound escapes him when Anthony's lips open under his own. He turns his face to the side, trying to get his senses under control; it feels like everything is catching fire.

Anthony cups his face again and touches his forehead to Loki's, and together they breathe. Their bond sings, clearly happy with the recent developments. If even Loki can feel it this prominently - feeling and actively using the bond are usually the Guide's area of expertise -, he can't imagine what it's like for Anthony.

"I can feel you," Anthony whispers. He takes Loki's hand and presses it against his chest, where the arc reactor is humming. "I can actually *feel* you."

Loki chuckles quietly. "And I you."

"Fucking hell."

"Agin, crude. But yes. I agree with the sentiment."

“You -” Anthony exhales. He gives off waves of - well, happiness, first and foremost, but also understanding and sympathy. “You’ve been waiting for this for so long.”

Loki nods. Anthony shifts and suddenly he’s in Loki’s lap, his arms around Loki’s neck and his head on Loki’s shoulder. He doesn’t say anything, and Loki doesn’t, either. There is no need for it.

*

They stay in Malibu, alone, for almost two months. At that point Tony thinks that they could easily stay alone for a few months longer, but naturally the universe isn’t that kind.

They are in the workshop, as so often. Loki is trying to decipher a book about a certain unexplored kind of Muspelheim magic that he found in his pocket dimension (his pocket dimensions are a fucking wonder) and Tony is developing a way to make his suits invisible for at least a short stretch of time, and it’s easy. Companionable. The need to be close at all times has eased in the last days, which is good; according to Loki it means that the bond is as good as finished. He still doesn’t like it when Tony isn’t in the same room, but he doesn’t need to be touching Tony constantly, and Tony’s chest doesn’t hurt anymore when they aren’t together for a short while. It’s likely that it would come back if they were to be apart for a few hours, but at least they’re not glued to each other anymore.

Not that it actually bothered Tony, it didn’t. What scared him a bit - and still scares him, if he’s honest - is the sense of dependency. He’s never been so desperate to keep someone, and it’s a lot to handle. But the thing is, he feels so much *better* now, and the thought of getting worse again isn’t a good one. Tony likes being able to sleep for a few hours straight on most nights because Loki is curled around him and breathing evenly, he likes being able to go back to sleep after a nightmare because Loki can murmur stories until Anthony’s mind goes quiet. He likes not having to drown his thoughts in whiskey because Loki is always right there, willing to listen to all of Tony’s ramblings and musings. He likes feeling at home in his own body.

And he likes the bond, too. It’s weird, of course, fucking weird, in fact, but it’s also the greatest source of comfort Tony has ever known. He has gotten good at using it, at least that’s what Loki says, and Tony has to admit that his Sentinel isn’t wrong. When he wants to, Tony can open up the bond and share something with Loki, anything - amusement, often, or sometimes affection when Tony can’t put it into words, and now and then a quite healthy dose of *I swear to god if you don’t get your shit together I’ll kick your ass*. Because, yes, the one at the beach wasn’t their only “little squabble”. They’re both sort of assholes, and they can both be annoying and stubborn at times, so of course it rubs Tony the wrong way when Loki politely asks him to postpone calling Pepper and Rhodey because his possessive instincts are still going haywire. Of course Loki doesn’t like it when Tony accidentally - or not so accidentally - suggests that Loki could be Iron Man’s sidekick. Of course they crash and burn now and then, but so far the fires have been small, easy to quench. They are simply getting used to each other, to not being alone anymore.

There will be more fires, probably, maybe even bigger, more dangerous ones, but Tony knows that he is the very first thing Loki thinks about when he wakes up, and he isn't scared that Loki will leave anymore.

It's all good. Honestly. In the end, happiness is a strangely uneventful affair.

"Anthony."

"Mh."

"Your phone is making noises."

Tony doesn't look up from his project. "My phone is upstairs."

"Yes," Loki says, impatient. "Your phone is making noises upstairs."

"It's on silent," Tony replies, more or less patiently. They had a Discussion about this very topic a few days ago, because apparently the sounds the phone makes for notifications are fit to drive a Sentinel insane. But only when a Sentinel, for who the fuck knows what reason, doesn't manage ignoring them anymore like he has been for literal weeks. "It can't be making noises."

"It is making very silent clicking noises when a message comes in," Loki says. "Of course you can't hear them."

"Of course," Tony echoes dryly. "JARVIS, why is my phone making noises?"

"Because Director Fury demands your attention, sir."

Tony is glad to see that Loki doesn't flinch anymore when JARVIS speaks up - apparently, a voice without a body is a disconcerting thing for a Sentinel -, but that relief is dampened by what JARVIS said. "Fury? What's his problem, did they come and steal his other eye?"

"I will steal his other eye if he doesn't leave us alone," Loki says, very quietly and very sweetly. Tony throws a screwdriver at him, but Loki catches it effortlessly without even looking up from his book and sets it aside with pointed care.

"His remaining eye seems to be fine as of yet," JARVIS says. *"But Dr. Doom is attacking New York."*

They both groan.

"Again?" Tony says. "Doesn't he know when it's time to stop?"

"Apparently not, sir. The Avengers are asking for your assistance."

"Aren't they always?" Tony sighs and looks at Loki, who is already staring at him with narrowed eyes. "Don't look at me like that."

"I know what you are thinking," Loki says. "I don't like it."

“But it’s about time, don’t you think?” Tony stands up and takes the few steps to Loki’s desk, wrapping his arms around Loki from behind. Contact always soothes him. “We handled New York just fine.”

Loki makes a noncommittal noise, which means that he reluctantly agrees. They were in New York for just a few hours last week, meeting Pepper, Rhodey, and the team, because Tony had insisted that they couldn’t live like eremites for the rest of their lives. Loki had said - with that hot but at times annoying “I do what I want” attitude of his - that yes, they very well could if it pleased them. He still came along in the end, because of course he did, and even though he wasn’t overly friendly to the others, he managed well enough. When they came home, they spent the entire rest of the day in bed, something that Tony definitely wasn’t - and isn’t - complaining about.

“I told you I wouldn’t just stop being Iron Man,” Tony says, gently. “That’s a part of the package.”

“I know,” Loki says, and sighs. “Seeing you fight will likely scare me to death.”

“You’re being dramatic.”

“No.”

“Yes,” Tony counters. “You’ve seen me fight. I beat your ass a few times.” Which is true. Just in sparring, but well, that counts, right?

Another one of those noncommittal sounds. Tony chuckles and kisses Loki’s cheek. “Running before walking, remember? Let’s go.”

Loki makes a face, but he lets Anthony take his hand and pull him over to the suits. Before Tony can take on the one that Loki carved a couple of weird runes in - for protection -, Loki tightens his hold on his hand and pulls him so close that their noses are very nearly touching.

“I wouldn’t dream of giving you rules,” he says, which makes Tony smile.

“Good.”

“But I would like it,” Loki continues, running his hands up and down Tony’s sides, “I would like it very much if you didn’t get out of my sight during the fight. And if you didn’t do anything overly reckless. Believe me, it will be better for everyone involved when I don’t get unnecessarily nervous.”

Tony nods, still smiling. “Okay, fine. But only this time, alright? It’s just Doom, he’s no real challenge, so it’s fine if I don’t fight with everything I have. But when there’s a bigger threat, I can’t and won’t hide behind you.”

“I don’t need you to hide behind me.” Loki takes Tony’s hand and kisses his palm. “Just let me stay close to you.”

“Oh, I can do that.”

"Thank you. If Doom isn't much of a challenge, it won't take long."

"Nope. And don't think I didn't notice that you're stalling. Let me get into my suit or you'll sleep on the sofa tonight."

Loki huffs, but he doesn't deny the stalling aspect.

Tony is *impossibly* fond of him.

*

The fight itself is over very, very quickly. It's all a bit of an anticlimax, really.

One second - Loki and Tony have literally *just* arrived -, the city is filled with Doom's bots, but nobody knows where the fucker himself is, and the next second Loki is inclining his head to the side and says, "Oh, I can take care of this," and then he grabs Tony's metal-clad arm and whisks them away to a pretentious looking wannabe-supervillain lair, where Doom has one second to stare at them like a goldfish before Loki knocks him out with a burst of green energy.

Tony stands there and stares.

"Well," Loki says. "That was fun. His robots are all falling to the ground, it's very loud. Can we go home?"

"What just happened?" Tony asks, stunned. "Did you - is he -"

"Just unconscious."

"Jesus," Tony says. "You're giving me whiplash here. Okay, we have to take him to SHIELD and then we can go home, yeah, let's just -"

Loki spreads out his arm in front of Tony so that he can't approach the unconscious man. "Don't touch him, please. I can take him."

Tony accepts that easily - Loki already wasn't happy with Pep and Rhodey hugging him even after Tony told him that they definitely weren't planning to stab him in the back, it makes sense that Loki doesn't want him to touch someone who *would* definitely stab him in the back if given the chance. And so Loki throws Doom over his shoulder and they go and drop him off right in front of Fury's feet before Loki teleports them to Central Park, where the Avengers - except Thor and Big Green - are still standing more or less in the same positions like ten minutes ago.

"Sorry," Steve greets them. "What just happened?"

"Loki's going to be there at all battles from now on," Tony says. "That's what just happened."

“Oh,” Steve says. “That’s - okay. I mean. Welcome to the team? Is Doom really -”

"Taken care of," Loki says. "Yes. Obviously."

"Obviously," Clint repeats. "Alright, cool. You couldn't have gotten here like an hour sooner?"

"We were, uh, a bit busy."

"Busy." Natasha raises a brow in a way that tells Tony that her mind is currently somewhere in the gutter.

Tony would like to address that, but he is distracted because Loki is pulling him a few steps to the side for now apparent reason. Or at least it seems like there's no reason for it at first, but then Tony hears a whirring sound that gets louder and louder and then Thor lands on the ground with the usual force, right in the spot where Tony was standing a few seconds ago.

"Brother! It's good to see you -"

"How often have I told you to watch where you're landing?" Loki asks, sounding like he is getting more and more annoyed with each second that passes. "Anthony?"

"Yeah, of course. It was nice seeing you, guys - I'll call, okay?"

Loki brings them home (*home!!!*) and it would be a lie to say that Tony didn't enjoy himself *immensely*.

*

Back in the workshop, Tony steps out of the suit and immediately Loki is in his arms, pressing close and burying his face in the crook of Tony's shoulder. Tony strokes his back and does something that hasn't stopped being weird but has also started feeling like second nature to him now.

It's still just a nudge. It doesn't even feel like Tony is actively *doing* something, he just sends a wave of warmth over without even thinking about, a warmth he feels deep in his own core. A sense of *it's alright, you're fine. It's just me now*.

Just us.

And then Loki laughs.

"What's so funny?" Tony asks, already grinning himself.

"The city is too loud," Loki says and pulls back, looking at Tony with a wide smile, dimples and everything. "And all those people - I hate it. I truly hate it."

"Yes, that's why we left -"

"I hate it," Loki repeats. His smile doesn't fade. "But it didn't *ruin* me, I could have stayed there for longer if I had wanted to. Do you know what that means?"

"Yeah, I know, it's -"

"It means that I will be able to go *outside*."

His joy is contagious. Tony's grinning like a madman himself now. Loki may have been talking about traveling the realms together, but there was always a touch of uncertainty hovering under the words, as if Loki never fully believed that it would really be possible. That has changed now, and it's brilliant.

"I am going to show you *so much*," Loki says. He looks like it's physically impossible for him to stop grinning.

He kisses first Tony's forehead and then his mouth, and Tony thinks - he thinks that he's really fucking lucky, isn't he?

Yes.

*

Anthony is on the other side of the room, and it is surprisingly alright. He is at the bar with Banner, and his hand has brushed his friend's arm a few times in the last thirty minutes, that's something Loki can't help but be very acutely aware of. Seeing Anthony with others isn't easy - will never be easy - because a part of Loki will always want to keep him all to himself. Some Sentinels are more possessive than others and Loki has long figured out that he belongs in the first category, but he does recognize that some of these wishes are both irrational and unrealizable. And really, it's not like he wants to lock Anthony into a room and keep him there.

He's just the most comfortable when they are alone and at home, that's all.

But yes, all in all it is alright, because Loki can still feel Anthony somewhere at the back of his mind, his body, even though they're not right next to each other. He always can, now that the bond is fully and irrevocably in place.

"You're doing very well," Thor comments. His pride is pretty much tangible, and it's ridiculous.

Loki rolls his eyes. "It's a party, Thor. Being here is hardly a feat."

"For you, it is," Thor says, because if there is one thing they have in common, it's stubbornness. "A year ago, you weren't even able to leave your chambers on most days, let

alone be in a room full of people. I know you don't want to hear it, but I am happy for you."

Loki glances at him, reluctantly touched. "It's not that I don't want to hear it," he says, without looking at Thor, and takes a sip of his drink. "You always make a fool out of yourself when you're drunk, I only want to spare you the embarrassment."

"First of all, I'm not drunk." Thor frowns. "I think."

"Yes, that's how it usually starts."

"Also I never make a fool out of myself."

"And they call me a liar," Loki says dryly.

"Fine," Thor allows. "Maybe sometimes. But -"

He is distracted by something, throws a look at where Jane is standing and talking to some people Loki doesn't know. Thor's mouth twitches into a smile before he turns back to Loki, and Loki is... relieved, he finds. Unbelievably relieved. He's been a witness of these brief Sentinel and Guide communications countless times before, knows how Thor acts around Jane, what he looks like when there is something going on between the two of them that only they will ever know about.

And Loki doesn't have to be jealous anymore. He can smirk into his glass and be happy for his brother without the bitterness that followed him around his entire life. Anthony looks at him from across the room, smiling, and Loki is still getting used to the feeling of looking forward to something, everything, but he thinks it's finally settling in.

"Thor," he says, casual. "May I ask you a favor?"

"Anything," Thor says, like Loki knew he would.

"In private?"

Thor gives him a level look, then he nods. "We can speak on our floor. Would you like Tony to come with us?"

"I don't think so," Loki says and ignores Thor's surprise. "Let's meet at the elevators, yes?"

Thor agrees and goes to Jane to tell her where he's going, and Loki goes to Anthony. He puts a hand on the small of Anthony's back as soon as he is within reach. Banner only gets a brief smile.

"I will go with Thor to his and Jane's floor," he says quietly. "Only for a short while."

Anthony raises a brow. "Something I should know?"

Loki shakes his head. "I'll tell you when we're alone."

"Okay. Shout when you need something, yeah?"

"Of course," Loki says, aware that by *shout* Anthony means *use the bond to get his attention*. Arguably that works much better than shouting, but it's still an apt comparison.

It's odd, leaving Anthony alone here to go to the elevators, but it's... ah, not fine, not pleasant, but manageable. Thor is already waiting for him, a questioning look on his face.

"I'm fine," Loki says before Thor can ask. "There is no reason to worry."

Thor smiles. "Good news, then?"

"So to say."

They ride down to Thor's floor, and Loki hesitates only briefly before following Thor into the living room. It's a great show of trust, a Sentinel allowing another Sentinel to enter the rooms they share with their Guide, but Loki isn't actually surprised. They are brothers, after all. If Loki and Anthony ever feel like letting people into the Malibu mansion, Thor will probably be the first who gets an invitation.

They end up sitting at the kitchen table. Loki is thankful that he's still vaguely aware of Anthony's presence, that he isn't far away - it isn't like it hurts, or like Loki will get overwhelmed if he doesn't get back to Anthony right this second, but he is nervous, and he prefers being with Anthony when he is nervous.

"So?" Thor prompts, not impatient, but obviously curious. "What can I do?"

Loki clears his throat. "Well. To start with, I... I know that Anthony and I should have visited Asgard by now, that there are ceremonies and festivities to be held - don't think I have forgotten about that."

"You never forget about anything," Thor says, grinning. "Not when it doesn't suit you, at least. I wouldn't worry about it, though. Mother did say that you should come when both of you are ready and not a day earlier. You have time."

Loki nods slowly. Thor and Jane were in Asgard just last week, and a part of Loki wants to go home as well, but he also isn't sure if he is ready for that just yet. He has never been very popular in Asgard, most of all because the people usually didn't even get to see him, but also because, well - what kind of Sentinel was he back at home? Unbonded, for one thing, that always invokes either pity or incomprehension in others. And also he was such an *useless* mess, of course Asgard doesn't think that well of him.

No, he doesn't want to go back yet. Soon, but not yet.

"But we don't, really, do we?" he says tentatively. "That's the problem."

Thor frowns. "What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean." Loki arches a brow. "Jane was mortal, too. She isn't anymore."

Thor's face lights up. "Ah. Yes, of course."

"Yes," Loki says, "and I know it's not the tradition, that Anthony is supposed to get an apple during our bonding ceremony, but I'm afraid I don't feel a need for any ceremonies, and Anthony is older than Jane was. He is also -" He stops briefly, resisting the urge to spread a hand out over his chest. "Well, do not under any circumstances tell him I said this, but he *is* fragile, in some sense of the word. I would simply feel much more at ease if that was done and dealt with."

Thor is still smiling. "Yes, I understand. I -"

"I know it's a lot to ask," Loki hurries to say before Thor can protest in any way. "I know. But if you could go home and ask father to make an exception, which will probably not be a pleasant conversation, I'm aware, I would truly be grateful."

"Loki -"

"I might even say please if I really had to. I do hope I don't have to, though."

"Just listen for a moment, will you?"

Loki frowns at him. "There's no need to get loud."

Thor rolls his eyes and leans forward over the table. "Loki, Father is already one step ahead of you."

"I'm sorry?"

"We talked about this last week," Thor says and stands up. "Father and me, I mean. And Mother. They had already decided that tradition isn't that important in this case." He chuckles. "You should have seen my face when Father said that, I couldn't believe it."

Loki isn't sure if he is understanding this correctly. "Father said - what?"

"Well, that you have waited long enough, and that it's alright if the apple isn't a part of your ceremony." He glances at Loki over his shoulder as he opens the fridge. "Mother will absolutely insist on the ceremony, though, don't think she won't. Anyway, I've been wanting to give you this all evening."

He closes the fridge and then stands there, grinning like an overgrown child, with a golden apple in his hands.

Loki stares at it. "Thor."

"Yes?"

"You've been keeping one of Idunn's apples in your fridge for a whole week?"

"We didn't know where else to put it."

Loki stands up as well and stops in front of his brother. Relief seems to be a reoccurring sensation today, because he's feeling it again. Rather intensely.

"Go on, then," Thor says. "It's yours. Uh, Tony's, really, but -"

Loki takes the apple out of his hands and hugs him.

Thor freezes, he's like a big and warm and shocked statue in Loki's arms. Only when Loki doesn't pull back again immediately, Thor lets out a breath and hugs him back, squeezing so hard that it's almost painful.

They haven't hugged since Loki was a child.

*

Anthony is still talking to Banner - they can talk about their respective projects for hours - when Loki and Thor return to the party, and Loki makes a beeline for his Guide. He doesn't care that others can see, doesn't care that Banner hides his smile by drowning the rest of his drink; Loki just wraps his arms around Anthony from behind.


Anthony chuckles and leans against Loki's chest. "There you are. Alright?"

"More than," Loki says. "I have something for you."

"Nice. We're going home, then?"

Loki kisses his cheek. "Yes, we are."

Chapter End Notes

And that's the last one! I hope you enjoyed it! 

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!